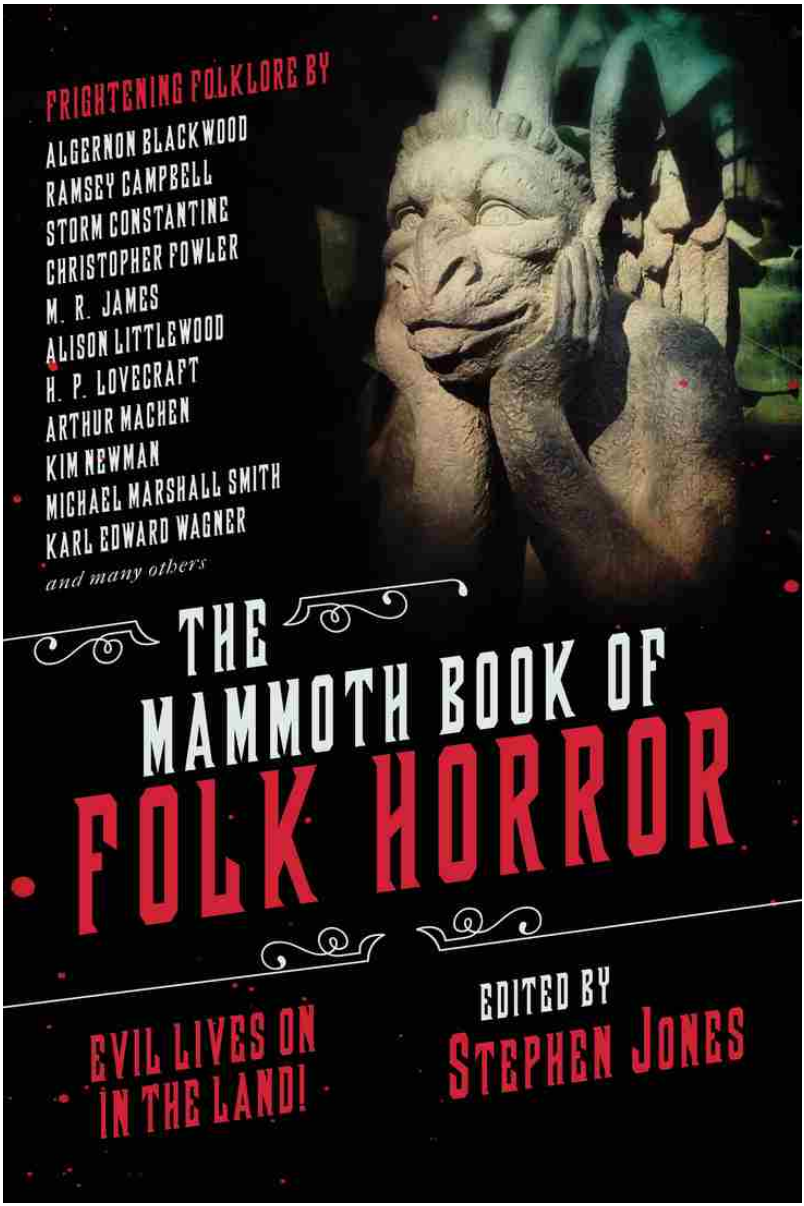
FRIGHTENING FOLKLORE BY
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RAMSEY CAMPBELL
STORM CONSTANTINE
CHRISTOPHER FOWLER
M. R. JAMES
ALISON LITTLEWOOD
H. P. LOVECRAFT
ARTHUR MACHEN
KIM NEWMAN
MICHAEL MARSHALL SMITH
KARL EDWARD WAGNER
and many others
THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF
FOLK HORROR
EVIL LIVES ON IN THE LAND!
EDITED BY
STEPHEN JONES

PRAISE FOR STEPHEN JONES

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THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF FOLK HORROR

FROM THE SAME EDITOR

The Mammoth Book of Halloween Stories

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Terrifying Tales to Tell at Night

THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF FOLK HORROR

EVIL LIVES ON IN THE LAND!

EDITED BY

STEPHEN JONES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

MICHAEL MARSHALL SMITH

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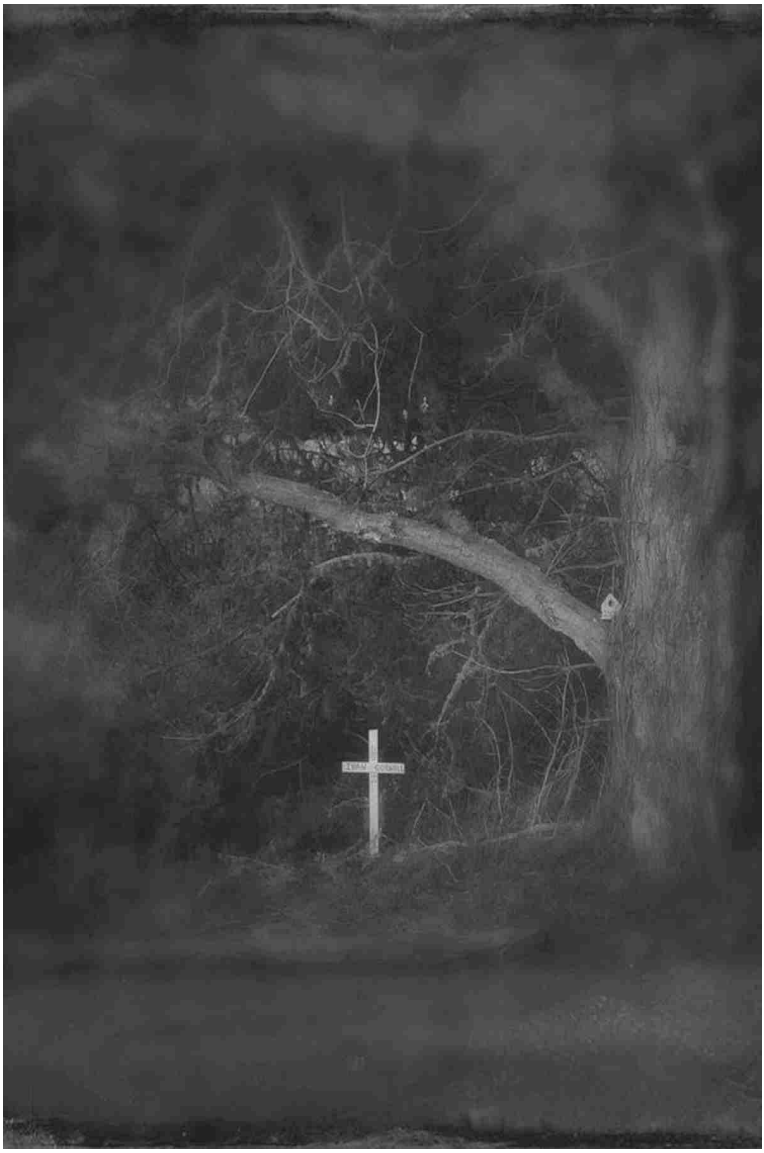
In memory of my friend
DENNIS ETCHISON
(1943–2019)
a masterful guide through the
Dark Country of our imagination

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”

—Algernon Blackwood



INTRODUCTION
THE TOPOGRAPHY OF TERROR

FOLK HORROR IS not a new phenomenon. In fact, this type of storytelling had existed for more than a century before British actor Mark Gatiss popularized the term in a 2010 television documentary, in which he quoted from a magazine interview with movie director Piers Haggard that had appeared six years earlier.

Since then—mostly as a result of younger horror fans using the description through social media and digital platforms in an attempt to categorize a certain type of subgenre—the term has become an established branch of the literature.

Although it casts its net widely, "folk horror" is basically the horrific side of folklore. It is the evil that endures beneath the earth; the disquiet that lingers in the woodland surrounding a forgotten path; those ancient traditions and practices that still cling to standing stone circles, earthworks, and abandoned buildings; elaborate rituals that invoke elder gods or nature's deities; the restless spirits and legendary creatures that remain somehow connected to a place or object, or exist in deep, dark wells and lonely pools of water, waiting to ensnare the unwary traveler.

(This latter theme was perhaps no better exemplified than in Jeff Grant's almost surreal 1973 public information film, "The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water," which was produced by Britain's Central Office of Information and—thanks to Donald Pleasence's genuinely unnerving narration—managed to scare a generation of children out of their wits!)

These concepts have been the archetypes of horror fiction for decades, but in recent years they have been given a name.

And not just in literature. The ideology of folk horror enthusiastically embraces the cinema as well. In fact, in part due to Gatiss's aforementioned TV documentary, the antecedent of this movement is widely regarded as having started with three British horror movies made in the late 1960s and early '70s. Collectively referred to as "The Unholy Trinity," it consists of Michael Reeves's nihilistic *Witchfinder General* (1968), which starred Vincent Price as the sadistic Matthew Hopkins, a real-life seventeenth-century English witchfinder; Piers Haggard's *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1970), where Patrick Wymark played another seventeenth-century authority figure, who investigates an outbreak of madness and evil in a rural English village; and Robin Hardy's contemporary *The Wicker Man* (1973), which found Christopher Lee's Lord Summerisle presiding over a pagan cult flourishing on an isolated Scottish island.

Although there are other examples from this period—*Cry of the Banshee* (1970), *Rawhead Rex* (1986), and *The Bulldance* (a.k.a. *Forbidden Sun*, 1988) immediately come to mind—these three films are defined by their landscape, and its effect upon those who exist within it, to convey an atmosphere of nameless dread and escalating horror.

But this was nothing new. Around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, three authors especially were turning out stories that mirrored exactly these same themes. Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and M. (Montague) R. (Rhodes) James were publishing fiction that had its roots in the landscape—whether it was ancient Welsh ruins, a rural European wilderness, or a deserted Suffolk beach—and the notion of the supernatural being linked to objects or places "left behind." All three writers are represented in this volume with powerful, and hopefully unfamiliar, examples of their work.

Arthur Machen, in particular, was a huge influence on the

American pulp magazine writer H. (Howard) P. (Phillips) Lovecraft, who not only incorporated many of Machen's themes and creations into his own fiction as a tribute, but also expanded upon them, giving much of his work an unparalleled atmosphere of "cosmic dread." The story by Lovecraft that I've selected for this book, "The Hound," is one of the author's lesserknown tales, although in this case it perhaps has more in common with M. R. James's classic 1904 story "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad."

Both Machen and Lovecraft were obvious influences—along with the work of pulp artist Lee Brown Coye—on the late Karl Edward Wagner's seminal backwoods horror story "Sticks," which in turn was cited as an influence on the first season of the HBO television crime series *True Detective* (2014), which itself is a superior example of the American folk horror tradition.

It is no surprise, given its ancient history and landscape, that the setting for much of what we have come to regard as folk horror is the British Isles. Machen, Blackwood, and James—along with those who followed them, such as Robert Aickman, Alan Garner, Nigel Kneale, Susan Hill, and others—were British, and "The Unholy Trinity" of movies detailed above were all made and set in that same rich locale.

And so it is that many of the stories in this anthology also take place in that specific rural setting. This is only to be expected. But every country, every culture, has its own versions of folk horror, and as editor, it has been my pleasure to expand the reach of the theme and also include stories set in Denmark, Ireland, India, Mexico, and the rural United States (upstate New York, New England, and southern Idaho). I only wish that I had room to include a few more.

There is no doubt that over the past decade, the concept of folk horror has taken hold and has now become a legitimate subgenre of horror fiction and film. Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* (2011), Elliot Goldner's *The Borderlands* (a.k.a. *Final Prayer*, 2015),

Robert Eggers's *The Witch* (2015), and Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) are just some of the movies to emerge in the wake of this redefined category, while novels and anthologies exploring the themes now appear on a regular basis.

I trust that this present volume adds something to that body of work about these huge, menacing, and ultimately unknowable forces that besiege mankind. The stories in this book tap into an aspect of folkloric tradition that has long been dormant, but never quite forgotten, in the human psyche, while the depiction of these forces as being perhaps in some aspect "natural"—as opposed to the more traditional "supernatural"—in no way detracts from the helpless terror they inspire . . .

STEPHEN JONES
LONDON, ENGLAND

THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF FOLK HORROR

THE WHITE PEOPLE

ARTHUR MACHEN

Arthur Machen (1863–1947) was born Arthur Llewellyn Jones in Wales. He worked as a clerk, teacher, actor, and journalist while writing stories of horror and fantasy rooted in the myths of his homeland. H. P. Lovecraft named Machen as one of the four "modern masters" of supernatural horror fiction (alongside Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany, and M. R. James).

Probably best known for his classic 1894 novella "The Great God Pan" (which Stephen King described as "maybe the best [horror story] in the English Language") and his 1914 story "The Bowmen" (which has since taken on the aspect of an urban legend), Machen's novels include *The Innermost Light*, *The Shining Pyramid*, *The Three Imposters*, and *The Hill of Dreams*. His best short stories are collected in *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural*.

Machen read widely in mystical literature and folklore, and he wrote "The White People" in 1899. As he questioned in his introduction to the story in his 1922 collection *The House of Souls*: "What limits can we place to the powers of the imagination? Has not the imagination the potentiality at least of performing any

miracle, however marvelous, however incredible, according to our ordinary standards? As to the decoration of the story, that is a mingling which I venture to think somewhat ingenious of odds and ends of folklore and witch-lore with pure inventions of my own."

In his seminal 1927 essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft noted: "Less famous and less complex in plot than 'The Great God Pan,' but definitely finer in atmosphere and general artistic value, is the curious and dimly disquieting chronicle called 'The White People,' whose central portion purports to be the diary or notes of a little girl whose nurse has introduced her to some of the forbidden magic and soul-blasting traditions of the noxious witch-cult—the cult whose whispered lore was handed down long lines of peasantry throughout Western Europe, and whose members sometimes stole forth at night, one by one, to meet in black woods and lonely places for the revolting orgies of the Witches' Sabbath. Mr. Machen's narrative, a triumph of skilful selectiveness and restraint, accumulates enormous power as it flows on in a stream of innocent childish prattle." The author went on to conclude that the story was "a masterpiece of fantastic writing, with almost unlimited power in the intimation of potent hideousness and cosmic aberration."

The short novel that follows is considered to be one of the most important horror stories ever published and one of the acknowledged building blocks of folk horror, still influencing new generations of writers today.

PROLOGUE

"SORCERY AND SANCTITY," said Ambrose, "these are the only

realities. Each is an ecstasy, a withdrawal from the common life."

Cotgrave listened, interested. He had been brought by a friend to this moldering house in a northern suburb, through an old garden to the room where Ambrose the recluse dozed and dreamed over his books.

"Yes," he went on, "magic is justified of her children. There are many, I think, who eat dry crusts and drink water, with a joy infinitely sharper than anything within the experience of the 'practical' epicure."

"You are speaking of the saints?"

"Yes, and of the sinners, too. I think you are falling into the very general error of confining the spiritual world to the supremely good; but the supremely wicked, necessarily, have their portion in it. The merely carnal, sensual man can no more be a great sinner than he can be a great saint. Most of us are just indifferent, mixed-up creatures; we muddle through the world without realizing the meaning and the inner sense of things, and, consequently, our wickedness and our goodness are alike second-rate, unimportant."

"And you think the great sinner, then, will be an ascetic, as well as the great saint?"

"Great people of all kinds forsake the imperfect copies and go to the perfect originals. I have no doubt but that many of the very highest among the saints have never done a 'good action' (using the words in their ordinary sense). And, on the other hand, there have been those who have sounded the very depths of sin, who all their lives have never done an 'ill deed.'"

He went out of the room for a moment, and Cotgrave, in high delight, turned to his friend and thanked him for the introduction.

"He's grand," he said. "I never saw that kind of lunatic before."

Ambrose returned with more whiskey and helped the two men in a liberal manner. He abused the teetotal sect with ferocity, as he handed the seltzer, and pouring out a glass of water for himself, was about to resume his monologue, when Cotgrave broke in—

“I can’t stand it, you know,” he said, “your paradoxes are too monstrous. A man may be a great sinner and yet never do anything sinful! Come!”

“You’re quite wrong,” said Ambrose. “I never make paradoxes; I wish I could. I merely said that a man may have an exquisite taste in Romanée Conti, and yet never have even smelled four ale. That’s all, and it’s more like a truism than a paradox, isn’t it? Your surprise at my remark is due to the fact that you haven’t realized what sin is. Oh, yes, there is a sort of connection between Sin with the capital letter, and actions which are commonly called sinful: with murder, theft, adultery, and so forth. Much the same connection that there is between the A, B, C, and fine literature. But I believe that the misconception—it is all but universal—arises in great measure from our looking at the matter through social spectacles. We think that a man who does evil to us and to his neighbors must be very evil. So he is, from a social standpoint; but can’t you realize that Evil in its essence is a lonely thing, a passion of the solitary, individual soul? Really, the average murderer, *qua* murderer, is not by any means a sinner in the true sense of the word. He is simply a wild beast that we have to get rid of to save our own necks from his knife. I should class him rather with tigers than with sinners.”

“It seems a little strange.”

“I think not. The murderer murders not from positive qualities, but from negative ones; he lacks something which non-murderers possess. Evil, of course, is wholly positive—only it is on the wrong side. You may believe me that sin in its proper sense is very rare; it is probable that there have been far fewer sinners than saints. Yes, your standpoint is all very well for practical, social purposes; we are naturally inclined to think that a person who is very disagreeable to us must be a very great sinner! It is very disagreeable to have one’s pocket picked, and we pronounce the thief to be a very great sinner. In truth, he is merely an undeveloped man. He cannot be a saint, of course; but he may be,

and often is, an infinitely better creature than thousands who have never broken a single commandment. He is a great nuisance to us, I admit, and we very properly lock him up if we catch him; but between his troublesome and unsocial action and evil—Oh, the connection is of the weakest."

It was getting very late. The man who had brought Cotgrave had probably heard all this before, since he assisted with a bland and judicious smile, but Cotgrave began to think that his "lunatic" was turning into a sage.

"Do you know," he said, "you interest me immensely? You think, then, that we do not understand the real nature of evil?"

"No, I don't think we do. We over-estimate it and we underestimate it. We take the very numerous infractions of our social 'bye-laws'—the very necessary and very proper regulations which keep the human company together—and we get frightened at the prevalence of 'sin' and 'evil.' But this is really nonsense. Take theft, for example. Have you any *horror* at the thought of Robin Hood, of the Highland caterans of the seventeenth century, of the moss-troopers, of the company promoters of our day?

"Then, on the other hand, we underrate evil. We attach such an enormous importance to the 'sin' of meddling with our pockets (and our wives) that we have quite forgotten the awfulness of real sin."

"And what is sin?" said Cotgrave.

"I think I must reply to your question by another. What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad. And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the pebble that you noticed at night had shot out stony blossoms in the morning?

"Well, these examples may give you some notion of what sin really is."

“Look here,” said the third man, hitherto placid, “you two seem pretty well wound up. But I’m going home. I’ve missed my tram, and I shall have to walk.”

Ambrose and Cotgrave seemed to settle down more profoundly when the other had gone out into the early misty morning and the pale light of the lamps.

“You astonish me,” said Cotgrave. “I had never thought of that. If that is really so, one must turn everything upside down. Then the essence of sin really is—”

“In the taking of Heaven by storm, it seems to me,” said Ambrose. “It appears to me that it is simply an attempt to penetrate into another and higher sphere in a forbidden manner. You can understand why it is so rare. There are few, indeed, who wish to penetrate into other spheres, higher or lower, in ways allowed or forbidden. Men, in the mass, are amply content with life as they find it. Therefore there are few saints, and sinners (in the proper sense) are fewer still, and men of genius, who partake sometimes of each character, are rare also. Yes; on the whole, it is, perhaps, harder to be a great sinner than a great saint.”

“There is something profoundly unnatural about Sin? Is that what you mean?”

“Exactly. Holiness requires as great, or almost as great, an effort; but holiness works on lines that *were* natural once; it is an effort to recover the ecstasy that was before the Fall. But sin is an effort to gain the ecstasy and the knowledge that pertain alone to angels and in making this effort man becomes a demon. I told you that the mere murderer is not *therefore* a sinner; that is true, but the sinner is sometimes a murderer. Gilles de Raiz is an instance. So you see that while the good and the evil are unnatural to man as he now is—to man the social, civilized being—evil is unnatural in a much deeper sense than good. The saint endeavors to recover a gift which he has lost; the sinner tries to obtain something which was never his. In brief, he repeats the Fall.”

“But are you a Catholic?” said Cotgrave.

“Yes; I am a member of the persecuted Anglican Church.”

“Then, how about those texts which seem to reckon as sin that which you would set down as a mere trivial dereliction?”

“Yes; but in one place the word ‘sorcerers’ comes in the same sentence, doesn’t it? That seems to me to give the key-note. Consider: can you imagine for a moment that a false statement which saves an innocent man’s life is a sin? No; very good, then, it is not the mere liar who is excluded by those words; it is, above all, the ‘sorcerers’ who use the material life, who use the failings incidental to material life as instruments to obtain their infinitely wicked ends. And let me tell you this: our higher senses are so blunted, we are so drenched with materialism, that we should probably fail to recognize real wickedness if we encountered it.”

“But shouldn’t we experience a certain horror—a terror such as you hinted we would experience if a rose tree sang—in the mere presence of an evil man?”

“We should if we were natural: children and women feel this horror you speak of, even animals experience it. But with most of us convention and civilization and education have blinded and deafened and obscured the natural reason. No, sometimes we may recognize evil by its hatred of the good—one doesn’t need much penetration to guess at the influence which dictated, quite unconsciously, the *Blackwood* review of Keats—but this is purely incidental; and, as a rule, I suspect that the Hierarchs of Tophet pass quite unnoticed, or, perhaps, in certain cases, as good but mistaken men.”

“But you used the word ‘unconscious’ just now, of Keats’s reviewers. Is wickedness ever unconscious?”

“Always. It must be so. It is like holiness and genius in this as in other points; it is a certain rapture or ecstasy of the soul; a transcendent effort to surpass the ordinary bounds. So, surpassing these, it surpasses also the understanding, the faculty that takes note of that which comes before it. No, a man may be infinitely and horribly wicked and never suspect it. But I tell you, evil in

this, its certain and true sense, is rare, and I think it is growing rarer."

"I am trying to get hold of it all," said Cotgrave. "From what you say, I gather that the true evil differs generically from that which we call evil?"

"Quite so. There is, no doubt, an analogy between the two; a resemblance such as enables us to use, quite legitimately, such terms as the 'foot of the mountain' and the 'leg of the table.' And, sometimes, of course, the two speak, as it were, in the same language. The rough miner, or 'puddler,' the untrained, undeveloped 'tiger-man,' heated by a quart or two above his usual measure, comes home and kicks his irritating and injudicious wife to death. He is a murderer. And Gilles de Raiz was a murderer. But you see the gulf that separates the two? The 'word,' if I may so speak, is accidentally the same in each case, but the 'meaning' is utterly different. It is flagrant 'Hobson Jobson' to confuse the two, or rather, it is as if one supposed that Juggernaut and the Argonauts had something to do etymologically with one another. And no doubt the same weak likeness, or analogy, runs between all the 'social' sins and the real spiritual sins, and in some cases, perhaps, the lesser may be 'schoolmasters' to lead one on to the greater—from the shadow to the reality. If you are anything of a Theologian, you will see the importance of all this."

"I am sorry to say," remarked Cotgrave, "that I have devoted very little of my time to theology. Indeed, I have often wondered on what grounds theologians have claimed the title of Science of Sciences for their favorite study; since the 'theological' books I have looked into have always seemed to me to be concerned with feeble and obvious pieties, or with the kings of Israel and Judah. I do not care to hear about those kings."

Ambrose grinned.

"We must try to avoid theological discussion," he said. "I perceive that you would be a bitter disputant. But perhaps the 'dates of the kings' have as much to do with theology as the

hobnails of the murderous puddler with evil."

"Then, to return to our main subject, you think that sin is an esoteric, occult thing?"

"Yes. It is the infernal miracle as holiness is the supernal. Now and then it is raised to such a pitch that we entirely fail to suspect its existence; it is like the note of the great pedal pipes of the organ, which is so deep that we cannot hear it. In other cases it may lead to the lunatic asylum, or to still stranger issues. But you must never confuse it with mere social misdoing. Remember how the Apostle, speaking of the 'other side,' distinguishes between 'charitable' actions and charity. And as one may give all one's goods to the poor, and yet lack charity; so, remember, one may avoid every crime and yet be a sinner."

"Your psychology is very strange to me," said Cotgrave, "but I confess I like it, and I suppose that one might fairly deduce from your premises the conclusion that the real sinner might very possibly strike the observer as a harmless personage enough?"

"Certainly, because the true evil has nothing to do with social life or social laws, or if it has, only incidentally and accidentally. It is a lonely passion of the soul—or a passion of the lonely soul—whichever you like. If, by chance, we understand it, and grasp its full significance, then, indeed, it will fill us with horror and with awe. But this emotion is widely distinguished from the fear and the disgust with which we regard the ordinary criminal, since this latter is largely or entirely founded on the regard which we have for our own skins or purses. We hate a murder, because we know that we should hate to be murdered, or to have any one that we like murdered. So, on the 'other side,' we venerate the saints, but we don't 'like' them as well as our friends. Can you persuade yourself that you would have 'enjoyed' St. Paul's company? Do you think that you and I would have 'got on' with Sir Galahad?

"So with the sinners, as with the saints. If you met a very evil man, and recognized his evil; he would, no doubt, fill you with horror and awe; but there is no reason why you should 'dislike'

him. On the contrary, it is quite possible that if you could succeed in putting the sin out of your mind you might find the sinner capital company, and in a little while you might have to reason yourself back into horror. Still, how awful it is. If the roses and the lilies suddenly sang on this coming morning; if the furniture began to move in procession, as in De Maupassant's tale!"

"I am glad you have come back to that comparison," said Cotgrave, "because I wanted to ask you what it is that corresponds in humanity to these imaginary feats of inanimate things. In a word—what is sin? You have given me, I know, an abstract definition, but I should like a concrete example."

"I told you it was very rare," said Ambrose, who appeared willing to avoid the giving of a direct answer. "The materialism of the age, which has done a good deal to suppress sanctity, has done perhaps more to suppress evil. We find the earth so very comfortable that we have no inclination either for ascents or descents. It would seem as if the scholar who decided to 'specialize' in Tophet, would be reduced to purely antiquarian researches. No paleontologist could show you a *live* pterodactyl."

"And yet you, I think, have 'specialized,' and I believe that your researches have descended to our modern times."

"You are really interested, I see. Well, I confess, that I have dabbled a little, and if you like I can show you something that bears on the very curious subject we have been discussing."

Ambrose took a candle and went away to a far, dim corner of the room. Cotgrave saw him open a venerable bureau that stood there, and from some secret recess he drew out a parcel, and came back to the window where they had been sitting.

Ambrose undid a wrapping of paper, and produced a pocket-book.

"You will take care of it?" he said. "Don't leave it lying about. It is one of the choicer pieces in my collection, and I should be very sorry if it were lost."

He fondled the faded binding.

“I knew the girl who wrote this,” he said. “When you read it, you will see how it illustrates the talk we have had tonight. There is a sequel, too, but I won’t talk of that.

“There was an odd article in one of the reviews some months ago,” he began again, with the air of a man who changes the subject. “It was written by a doctor—Dr. Coryn, I think, was the name. He says that a lady, watching her little girl playing at the drawing-room window, suddenly saw the heavy sash give way and fall on the child’s fingers. The lady fainted, I think, but at any rate the doctor was summoned, and when he had dressed the child’s wounded and maimed fingers he was summoned to the mother. She was groaning with pain, and it was found that three fingers of her hand, corresponding with those that had been injured on the child’s hand, were swollen and inflamed, and later, in the doctor’s language, purulent sloughing set in.”

Ambrose still handled delicately the green volume.

“Well, here it is,” he said at last, parting with difficulty, it seemed, from his treasure.

“You will bring it back as soon as you have read it,” he said, as they went out into the hall, into the old garden, faint with the odor of white lilies.

There was a broad red band in the east as Cotgrave turned to go, and from the high ground where he stood he saw that awful spectacle of London in a dream.

THE GREEN BOOK

THE MOROCCO BINDING of the book was faded, and the color had grown faint, but there were no stains nor bruises nor marks of usage. The book looked as if it had been bought “on a visit to London” some seventy or eighty years ago, and had somehow been forgotten and suffered to lie away out of sight. There was an old, delicate, lingering odor about it, such an odor as sometimes haunts

an ancient piece of furniture for a century or more. The end-papers, inside the binding, were oddly decorated with colored patterns and faded gold. It looked small, but the paper was fine, and there were many leaves, closely covered with minute, painfully formed characters.

> I found this book [the manuscript began] in a drawer in the old bureau that stands on the landing. It was a very rainy day and I could not go out, so in the afternoon I got a candle and rummaged in the bureau. Nearly all the drawers were full of old dresses, but one of the small ones looked empty, and I found this book hidden right at the back. I wanted a book like this, so I took it to write in. It is full of secrets. I have a great many other books of secrets I have written, hidden in a safe place, and I am going to write here many of the old secrets and some new ones; but there are some I shall not put down at all. I must not write down the real names of the days and months which I found out a year ago, nor the way to make the Aklo letters, or the Chian language, or the great beautiful Circles, nor the Mao Games, nor the chief songs. I may write something about all these things but not the way to do them, for peculiar reasons. And I must not say who the Nymphs are, or the Dôls, or Jeelo, or what voolas mean. All these are most secret secrets, and I am glad when I remember what they are, and how many wonderful languages I know, but there are some things that I call the secrets of the secrets of the secrets that I dare not think of unless I am quite alone, and then I shut my eyes, and put my hands over them and whisper the word, and the Alala comes. I only do this at night in my room or in certain woods that I know, but I must not describe them, as they are secret woods. Then there are the Ceremonies, which are all of them important, but some are more delightful

than others—there are the White Ceremonies, and the Green Ceremonies, and the Scarlet Ceremonies. The Scarlet Ceremonies are the best, but there is only one place where they can be performed properly, though there is a very nice imitation which I have done in other places. Besides these, I have the dances, and the Comedy, and I have done the Comedy sometimes when the others were looking, and they didn't understand anything about it. I was very little when I first knew about these things.

When I was very small, and mother was alive, I can remember remembering things before that, only it has all got confused. But I remember when I was five or six I heard them talking about me when they thought I was not noticing. They were saying how queer I was a year or two before, and how nurse had called my mother to come and listen to me talking all to myself, and I was saying words that nobody could understand. I was speaking the Xu language, but I only remember a very few of the words, as it was about the little white faces that used to look at me when I was lying in my cradle. They used to talk to me, and I learnt their language and talked to them in it about some great white place where they lived, where the trees and the grass were all white, and there were white hills as high up as the moon, and a cold wind. I have often dreamed of it afterward, but the faces went away when I was very little. But a wonderful thing happened when I was about five. My nurse was carrying me on her shoulder; there was a field of yellow corn, and we went through it, it was very hot. Then we came to a path through a wood, and a tall man came after us, and went with us till we came to a place where there was a deep pool, and it was very dark and shady. Nurse put me down on the soft moss under a tree, and she said: "She can't get to the pond now." So they left me there, and I

sat quite still and watched, and out of the water and out of the wood came two wonderful white people, and they began to play and dance and sing. They were a kind of creamy white like the old ivory figure in the drawing-room; one was a beautiful lady with kind dark eyes, and a grave face, and long black hair, and she smiled such a strange sad smile at the other, who laughed and came to her. They played together, and danced round and round the pool, and they sang a song till I fell asleep. Nurse woke me up when she came back, and she was looking something like the lady had looked, so I told her all about it, and asked her why she looked like that. At first she cried, and then she looked very frightened, and turned quite pale. She put me down on the grass and stared at me, and I could see she was shaking all over. Then she said I had been dreaming, but I knew I hadn't. Then she made me promise not to say a word about it to anybody, and if I did I should be thrown into the black pit. I was not frightened at all, though nurse was, and I never forgot about it, because when I shut my eyes and it was quite quiet, and I was all alone, I could see them again, very faint and far away, but very splendid; and little bits of the song they sang came into my head, but I couldn't sing it.

I was thirteen, nearly fourteen, when I had a very singular adventure, so strange that the day on which it happened is always called the White Day. My mother had been dead for more than a year, and in the morning I had lessons, but they let me go out for walks in the afternoon. And this afternoon I walked a new way, and a little brook led me into a new country, but I tore my frock getting through some of the difficult places, as the way was through many bushes, and beneath the low branches of trees, and up thorny thickets on the hills, and by dark

woods full of creeping thorns. And it was a long, long way. It seemed as if I was going on for ever and ever, and I had to creep by a place like a tunnel where a brook must have been, but all the water had dried up, and the floor was rocky, and the bushes had grown overhead till they met, so that it was quite dark. And I went on and on through that dark place; it was a long, long way. And I came to a hill that I never saw before. I was in a dismal thicket full of black twisted boughs that tore me as I went through them, and I cried out because I was smarting all over, and then I found that I was climbing, and I went up and up a long way, till at last the thicket stopped and I came out crying just under the top of a big bare place, where there were ugly gray stones lying all about on the grass, and here and there a little twisted, stunted tree came out from under a stone, like a snake. And I went up, right to the top, a long way. I never saw such big ugly stones before; they came out of the earth some of them, and some looked as if they had been rolled to where they were, and they went on and on as far as I could see, a long, long way. I looked out from them and saw the country, but it was strange. It was winter time, and there were black terrible woods hanging from the hills all round; it was like seeing a large room hung with black curtains, and the shape of the trees seemed quite different from any I had ever seen before. I was afraid. Then beyond the woods there were other hills round in a great ring, but I had never seen any of them; it all looked black, and everything had a voor over it. It was all so still and silent, and the sky was heavy and gray and sad, like a wicked voorish dome in Deep Dendo. I went on into the dreadful rocks. There were hundreds and hundreds of them. Some were like horrid-grinning men; I could see their faces as if they would jump at me out of the stone,

and catch hold of me, and drag me with them back into the rock, so that I should always be there. And there were other rocks that were like animals, creeping, horrible animals, putting out their tongues, and others were like words that I could not say, and others like dead people lying on the grass. I went on among them, though they frightened me, and my heart was full of wicked songs that they put into it; and I wanted to make faces and twist myself about in the way they did, and I went on and on a long way till at last I liked the rocks, and they didn't frighten me anymore. I sang the songs I thought of; songs full of words that must not be spoken or written down. Then I made faces like the faces on the rocks, and I twisted myself about like the twisted ones, and I lay down flat on the ground like the dead ones, and I went up to one that was grinning, and put my arms round him and hugged him. And so I went on and on through the rocks till I came to a round mound in the middle of them. It was higher than a mound, it was nearly as high as our house, and it was like a great basin turned upside down, all smooth and round and green, with one stone, like a post, sticking up at the top. I climbed up the sides, but they were so steep I had to stop or I should have rolled all the way down again, and I should have knocked against the stones at the bottom, and perhaps been killed. But I wanted to get up to the very top of the big round mound, so I lay down flat on my face, and took hold of the grass with my hands and drew myself up, bit by bit, till I was at the top. Then I sat down on the stone in the middle, and looked all round about. I felt I had come such a long, long way, just as if I were a hundred miles from home, or in some other country, or in one of the strange places I had read about in the *Tales of the Genie* and the *Arabian Nights*, or as if I had gone across the sea,

far away, for years and I had found another world that nobody had ever seen or heard of before, or as if I had somehow flown through the sky and fallen on one of the stars I had read about where everything is dead and cold and gray, and there is no air, and the wind doesn't blow. I sat on the stone and looked all round and down and round about me. It was just as if I was sitting on a tower in the middle of a great empty town, because I could see nothing all around but the gray rocks on the ground. I couldn't make out their shapes anymore, but I could see them on and on for a long way, and I looked at them, and they seemed as if they had been arranged into patterns, and shapes, and figures. I knew they couldn't be, because I had seen a lot of them coming right out of the earth, joined to the deep rocks below, so I looked again, but still I saw nothing but circles, and small circles inside big ones, and pyramids, and domes, and spires, and they seemed all to go round and round the place where I was sitting, and the more I looked, the more I saw great big rings of rocks, getting bigger and bigger, and I stared so long that it felt as if they were all moving and turning, like a great wheel, and I was turning, too, in the middle. I got quite dizzy and queer in the head, and everything began to be hazy and not clear, and I saw little sparks of blue light, and the stones looked as if they were springing and dancing and twisting as they went round and round and round. I was frightened again, and I cried out loud, and jumped up from the stone I was sitting on, and fell down. When I got up I was so glad they all looked still, and I sat down on the top and slid down the mound, and went on again. I danced as I went in the peculiar way the rocks had danced when I got giddy, and I was so glad I could do it quite well, and I danced and danced along, and sang extraordinary songs that came into my head. At

last I came to the edge of that great flat hill, and there were no more rocks, and the way went again through a dark thicket in a hollow. It was just as bad as the other one I went through climbing up, but I didn't mind this one, because I was so glad I had seen those singular dances and could imitate them. I went down, creeping through the bushes, and a tall nettle stung me on my leg, and made me burn, but I didn't mind it, and I tingled with the boughs and the thorns, but I only laughed and sang. Then I got out of the thicket into a close valley, a little secret place like a dark passage that nobody ever knows of, because it was so narrow and deep and the woods were so thick round it. There is a steep bank with trees hanging over it, and there the ferns keep green all through the winter, when they are dead and brown upon the hill, and the ferns there have a sweet, rich smell like what oozes out of fir trees. There was a little stream of water running down this valley, so small that I could easily step across it. I drank the water with my hand, and it tasted like bright, yellow wine, and it sparkled and bubbled as it ran down over beautiful red and yellow and green stones, so that it seemed alive and all colors at once. I drank it, and I drank more with my hand, but I couldn't drink enough, so I lay down and bent my head and sucked the water up with my lips. It tasted much better, drinking it that way, and a ripple would come up to my mouth and give me a kiss, and I laughed, and drank again, and pretended there was a nymph, like the one in the old picture at home, who lived in the water and was kissing me. So I bent low down to the water, and put my lips softly to it, and whispered to the nymph that I would come again. I felt sure it could not be common water, I was so glad when I got up and went on; and I danced again and went up and up the valley, under

hanging hills. And when I came to the top, the ground rose up in front of me, tall and steep as a wall, and there was nothing but the green wall and the sky. I thought of "for ever and for ever, world without end, Amen;" and I thought I must have really found the end of the world, because it was like the end of everything, as if there could be nothing at all beyond, except the kingdom of Voor, where the light goes when it is put out, and the water goes when the sun takes it away. I began to think of all the long, long way I had journeyed, how I had found a brook and followed it, and followed it on, and gone through bushes and thorny thickets, and dark woods full of creeping thorns. Then I had crept up a tunnel under trees, and climbed a thicket, and seen all the gray rocks, and sat in the middle of them when they turned round, and then I had gone on through the gray rocks and come down the hill through the stinging thicket and up the dark valley, all a long, long way. I wondered how I should get home again, if I could ever find the way, and if my home was there anymore, or if it were turned and everybody in it into gray rocks, as in the *Arabian Nights*. So I sat down on the grass and thought what I should do next. I was tired, and my feet were hot with walking, and as I looked about I saw there was a wonderful well just under the high, steep wall of grass. All the ground round it was covered with bright, green, dripping moss; there was every kind of moss there, moss like beautiful little ferns, and like palms and fir trees, and it was all green as jewelry, and drops of water hung on it like diamonds. And in the middle was the great well, deep and shining and beautiful, so clear that it looked as if I could touch the red sand at the bottom, but it was far below. I stood by it and looked in, as if I were looking in a glass. At the bottom of the well, in the middle of it, the red grains of

sand were moving and stirring all the time, and I saw how the water bubbled up, but at the top it was quite smooth, and full and brimming. It was a great well, large like a bath, and with the shining, glittering green moss about it, it looked like a great white jewel, with green jewels all round. My feet were so hot and tired that I took off my boots and stockings, and let my feet down into the water, and the water was soft and cold, and when I got up I wasn't tired anymore, and I felt I must go on, farther and farther, and see what was on the other side of the wall. I climbed up it very slowly, going sideways all the time, and when I got to the top and looked over, I was in the queerest country I had seen, stranger even than the hill of the gray rocks. It looked as if earth-children had been playing there with their spades, as it was all hills and hollows, and castles and walls made of earth and covered with grass. There were two mounds like big beehives, round and great and solemn, and then hollow basins, and then a steep mounting wall like the ones I saw once by the seaside where the big guns and the soldiers were. I nearly fell into one of the round hollows, it went away from under my feet so suddenly, and I ran fast down the side and stood at the bottom and looked up. It was strange and solemn to look up. There was nothing but the gray, heavy sky, and the sides of the hollow; everything else had gone away, and the hollow was the whole world, and I thought that at night it must be full of ghosts and moving shadows and pale things when the moon shone down to the bottom at the dead of the night, and the wind wailed up above. It was so strange and solemn and lonely, like a hollow temple of dead heathen gods. It reminded me of a tale my nurse had told me when I was quite little; it was the same nurse that took me into the wood where I saw the beautiful

white people. And I remembered how nurse had told me the story one winter night, when the wind was beating the trees against the wall, and crying and moaning in the nursery chimney. She said there was, somewhere or other, a hollow pit, just like the one I was standing in, everybody was afraid to go into it or near it, it was such a bad place. But once upon a time there was a poor girl who said she would go into the hollow pit, and everybody tried to stop her, but she would go. And she went down into the pit and came back laughing, and said there was nothing there at all, except green grass and red stones, and white stones and yellow flowers. And soon after people saw she had most beautiful emerald earrings, and they asked how she got them, as she and her mother were quite poor. But she laughed, and said her earrings were not made of emeralds at all, but only of green grass. Then, one day, she wore on her breast the reddest ruby that anyone had ever seen, and it was as big as a hen's egg, and glowed and sparkled like a hot burning coal of fire. And they asked how she got it, as she and her mother were quite poor. But she laughed, and said it was not a ruby at all, but only a red stone. Then one day she wore round her neck the loveliest necklace that any one had ever seen, much finer than the queen's finest, and it was made of great bright diamonds, hundreds of them, and they shone like all the stars on a night in June. So they asked her how she got it, as she and her mother were quite poor. But she laughed, and said they were not diamonds at all, but only white stones. And one day she went to the Court, and she wore on her head a crown of pure angel-gold, so nurse said, and it shone like the sun, and it was much more splendid than the crown the king was wearing himself, and in her ears she wore the emeralds, and the big ruby was the brooch on her breast,

and the great diamond necklace was sparkling on her neck. And the king and queen thought she was some great princess from a long way off, and got down from their thrones and went to meet her, but somebody told the king and queen who she was, and that she was quite poor. So the king asked why she wore a gold crown, and how she got it, as she and her mother were so poor. And she laughed, and said it wasn't a gold crown at all, but only some yellow flowers she had put in her hair. And the king thought it was very strange, and said she should stay at the Court, and they would see what would happen next. And she was so lovely that everybody said that her eyes were greener than the emeralds, that her lips were redder than the ruby, that her skin was whiter than the diamonds, and that her hair was brighter than the golden crown. So the king's son said he would marry her, and the king said he might. And the bishop married them, and there was a great supper, and afterward the king's son went to his wife's room. But just when he had his hand on the door, he saw a tall, black man, with a dreadful face, standing in front of the door, and a voice said—

> Venture not upon your life,
> This is mine own wedded wife.

Then the king's son fell down on the ground in a fit. And they came and tried to get into the room, but they couldn't, and they hacked at the door with hatchets, but the wood had turned hard as iron, and at last everybody ran away, they were so frightened at the screaming and laughing and shrieking and crying that came out of the room. But next day they went in, and found there was nothing in the room but thick black smoke, because the

black man had come and taken her away. And on the bed there were two knots of faded grass and a red stone, and some white stones, and some faded yellow flowers. I remembered this tale of nurse's while I was standing at the bottom of the deep hollow; it was so strange and solitary there, and I felt afraid. I could not see any stones or flowers, but I was afraid of bringing them away without knowing, and I thought I would do a charm that came into my head to keep the black man away. So I stood right in the very middle of the hollow, and I made sure that I had none of those things on me, and then I walked round the place, and touched my eyes, and my lips, and my hair in a peculiar manner, and whispered some queer words that nurse taught me to keep bad things away. Then I felt safe and climbed up out of the hollow, and went on through all those mounds and hollows and walls, till I came to the end, which was high above all the rest, and I could see that all the different shapes of the earth were arranged in patterns, something like the gray rocks, only the pattern was different. It was getting late, and the air was indistinct, but it looked from where I was standing something like two great figures of people lying on the grass. And I went on, and at last I found a certain wood, which is too secret to be described, and nobody knows of the passage into it, which I found out in a very curious manner, by seeing some little animal run into the wood through it. So I went after the animal by a very narrow dark way, under thorns and bushes, and it was almost dark when I came to a kind of open place in the middle. And there I saw the most wonderful sight I have ever seen, but it was only for a minute, as I ran away directly, and crept out of the wood by the passage I had come by, and ran and ran as fast as ever I could, because I was afraid, what I had seen was so

wonderful and so strange and beautiful. But I wanted to get home and think of it, and I did not know what might not happen if I stayed by the wood. I was hot all over and trembling, and my heart was beating, and strange cries that I could not help came from me as I ran from the wood. I was glad that a great white moon came up from over a round hill and showed me the way, so I went back through the mounds and hollows and down the close valley, and up through the thicket over the place of the gray rocks, and so at last I got home again. My father was busy in his study, and the servants had not told about my not coming home, though they were frightened, and wondered what they ought to do, so I told them I had lost my way, but I did not let them find out the real way I had been. I went to bed and lay awake all through the night, thinking of what I had seen. When I came out of the narrow way, and it looked all shining, though the air was dark, it seemed so certain, and all the way home I was quite sure that I had seen it, and I wanted to be alone in my room, and be glad over it all to myself, and shut my eyes and pretend it was there, and do all the things I would have done if I had not been so afraid. But when I shut my eyes the sight would not come, and I began to think about my adventures all over again, and I remembered how dusky and queer it was at the end, and I was afraid it must be all a mistake, because it seemed impossible it could happen. It seemed like one of nurse's tales, which I didn't really believe in, though I was frightened at the bottom of the hollow; and the stories she told me when I was little came back into my head, and I wondered whether it was really there what I thought I had seen, or whether any of her tales could have happened a long time ago. It was so queer; I lay awake there in my room at the back of the house, and the

moon was shining on the other side toward the river, so the bright light did not fall upon the wall. And the house was quite still. I had heard my father come upstairs, and just after the clock struck twelve, and after the house was still and empty, as if there was nobody alive in it. And though it was all dark and indistinct in my room, a pale glimmering kind of light shone in through the white blind, and once I got up and looked out, and there was a great black shadow of the house covering the garden, looking like a prison where men are hanged; and then beyond it was all white; and the wood shone white with black gulfs between the trees. It was still and clear, and there were no clouds on the sky. I wanted to think of what I had seen but I couldn't, and I began to think of all the tales that nurse had told me so long ago that I thought I had forgotten, but they all came back, and mixed up with the thickets and the gray rocks and the hollows in the earth and the secret wood, till I hardly knew what was new and what was old, or whether it was not all dreaming. And then I remembered that hot summer afternoon, so long ago, when nurse left me by myself in the shade, and the white people came out of the water and out of the wood, and played, and danced, and sang, and I began to fancy that nurse told me about something like it before I saw them, only I couldn't recollect exactly what she told me. Then I wondered whether she had been the white lady, as I remembered she was just as white and beautiful, and had the same dark eyes and black hair; and sometimes she smiled and looked like the lady had looked, when she was telling me some of her stories, beginning with "Once on a time," or "In the time of the fairies." But I thought she couldn't be the lady, as she seemed to have gone a different way into the wood, and I didn't think the man who came after us

could be the other, or I couldn't have seen that wonderful secret in the secret wood. I thought of the moon: but it was afterward when I was in the middle of the wild land, where the earth was made into the shape of great figures, and it was all walls, and mysterious hollows, and smooth round mounds, that I saw the great white moon come up over a round hill. I was wondering about all these things, till at last I got quite frightened, because I was afraid something had happened to me, and I remembered nurse's tale of the poor girl who went into the hollow pit, and was carried away at last by the black man. I knew I had gone into a hollow pit too, and perhaps it was the same, and I had done something dreadful. So I did the charm over again, and touched my eyes and my lips and my hair in a peculiar manner, and said the old words from the fairy language, so that I might be sure I had not been carried away. I tried again to see the secret wood, and to creep up the passage and see what I had seen there, but somehow I couldn't, and I kept on thinking of nurse's stories. There was one I remembered about a young man who once upon a time went hunting, and all the day he and his hounds hunted everywhere, and they crossed the rivers and went into all the woods, and went round the marshes, but they couldn't find anything at all, and they hunted all day till the sun sank down and began to set behind the mountain. And the young man was angry because he couldn't find anything, and he was going to turn back, when just as the sun touched the mountain, he saw come out of a brake in front of him a beautiful white stag. And he cheered to his hounds, but they whined and would not follow, and he cheered to his horse, but it shivered and stood stock still, and the young man jumped off the horse and left the hounds and began to follow the white stag all alone. And soon it was quite

dark, and the sky was black, without a single star shining in it, and the stag went away into the darkness. And though the man had brought his gun with him he never shot at the stag, because he wanted to catch it, and he was afraid he would lose it in the night. But he never lost it once, though the sky was so black and the air was so dark, and the stag went on and on till the young man didn't know a bit where he was. And they went through enormous woods where the air was full of whispers and a pale, dead light came out from the rotten trunks that were lying on the ground, and just as the man thought he had lost the stag, he would see it all white and shining in front of him, and he would run fast to catch it, but the stag always ran faster, so he did not catch it. And they went through the enormous woods, and they swam across rivers, and they waded through black marshes where the ground bubbled, and the air was full of will-o'-the-wisps, and the stag fled away down into rocky narrow valleys, where the air was like the smell of a vault, and the man went after it. And they went over the great mountains and the man heard the wind come down from the sky, and the stag went on and the man went after. At last the sun rose and the young man found he was in a country that he had never seen before; it was a beautiful valley with a bright stream running through it, and a great, big round hill in the middle. And the stag went down the valley, toward the hill, and it seemed to be getting tired and went slower and slower, and though the man was tired, too, he began to run faster, and he was sure he would catch the stag at last. But just as they got to the bottom of the hill, and the man stretched out his hand to catch the stag, it vanished into the earth, and the man began to cry; he was so sorry that he had lost it after all his long hunting. But as he was crying he saw there was a

door in the hill, just in front of him, and he went in, and it was quite dark, but he went on, as he thought he would find the white stag. And all of a sudden it got light, and there was the sky, and the sun shining, and birds singing in the trees, and there was a beautiful fountain. And by the fountain a lovely lady was sitting, who was the queen of the fairies, and she told the man that she had changed herself into a stag to bring him there because she loved him so much. Then she brought out a great gold cup, covered with jewels, from her fairy palace, and she offered him wine in the cup to drink. And he drank, and the more he drank the more he longed to drink, because the wine was enchanted. So he kissed the lovely lady, and she became his wife, and he stayed all that day and all that night in the hill where she lived, and when he woke he found he was lying on the ground, close to where he had seen the stag first, and his horse was there and his hounds were there waiting, and he looked up, and the sun sank behind the mountain. And he went home and lived a long time, but he would never kiss any other lady because he had kissed the queen of the fairies, and he would never drink common wine anymore, because he had drunk enchanted wine. And sometimes nurse told me tales that she had heard from her great-grandmother, who was very old, and lived in a cottage on the mountain all alone, and most of these tales were about a hill where people used to meet at night long ago, and they used to play all sorts of strange games and do queer things that nurse told me of, but I couldn't understand, and now, she said, everybody but her great-grandmother had forgotten all about it, and nobody knew where the hill was, not even her great-grandmother. But she told me one very strange story about the hill, and I trembled when I remembered it. She said that people always went there in

summer, when it was very hot, and they had to dance a good deal. It would be all dark at first, and there were trees there, which made it much darker, and people would come, one by one, from all directions, by a secret path which nobody else knew, and two persons would keep the gate, and every one as they came up had to give a very curious sign, which nurse showed me as well as she could, but she said she couldn't show me properly. And all kinds of people would come; there would be gentle folks and village folks, and some old people and boys and girls, and quite small children, who sat and watched. And it would all be dark as they came in, except in one corner where someone was burning something that smelled strong and sweet, and made them laugh, and there one would see a glaring of coals, and the smoke mounting up red. So they would all come in, and when the last had come there was no door anymore, so that no one else could get in, even if they knew there was anything beyond. And once a gentleman who was a stranger and had ridden a long way, lost his path at night, and his horse took him into the very middle of the wild country, where everything was upside down, and there were dreadful marshes and great stones everywhere, and holes underfoot, and the trees looked like gibbet-posts, because they had great black arms that stretched out across the way. And this strange gentleman was very frightened, and his horse began to shiver all over, and at last it stopped and wouldn't go any farther, and the gentleman got down and tried to lead the horse, but it wouldn't move, and it was all covered with a sweat, like death. So the gentleman went on all alone, going farther and farther into the wild country, till at last he came to a dark place, where he heard shouting and singing and crying, like nothing he had ever heard

before. It all sounded quite close to him, but he couldn't get in, and so he began to call, and while he was calling, something came behind him, and in a minute his mouth and arms and legs were all bound up, and he fell into a swoon. And when he came to himself, he was lying by the roadside, just where he had first lost his way, under a blasted oak with a black trunk, and his horse was tied beside him. So he rode on to the town and told the people there what had happened, and some of them were amazed; but others knew. So when once everybody had come, there was no door at all for anybody else to pass in by. And when they were all inside, round in a ring, touching each other, someone began to sing in the darkness, and someone else would make a noise like thunder with a thing they had on purpose, and on still nights people would hear the thundering noise far, far away beyond the wild land, and some of them, who thought they knew what it was, used to make a sign on their breasts when they woke up in their beds at dead of night and heard that terrible deep noise, like thunder on the mountains. And the noise and the singing would go on and on for a long time, and the people who were in a ring swayed a little to and fro; and the song was in an old, old language that nobody knows now, and the tune was queer. Nurse said her great-grandmother had known someone who remembered a little of it, when she was quite a little girl, and nurse tried to sing some of it to me, and it was so strange a tune that I turned all cold and my flesh crept as if I had put my hand on something dead. Sometimes it was a man that sang and sometimes it was a woman, and sometimes the one who sang it did it so well that two or three of the people who were there fell to the ground shrieking and tearing with their hands. The singing went on, and the people in the ring kept swaying

to and fro for a long time, and at last the moon would rise over a place they called the Tole Deol, and came up and showed them swinging and swaying from side to side, with the sweet thick smoke curling up from the burning coals, and floating in circles all around them. Then they had their supper. A boy and a girl brought it to them; the boy carried a great cup of wine, and the girl carried a cake of bread, and they passed the bread and the wine round and round, but they tasted quite different from common bread and common wine, and changed everybody that tasted them. Then they all rose up and danced, and secret things were brought out of some hiding place, and they played extraordinary games, and danced round and round and round in the moonlight, and sometimes people would suddenly disappear and never be heard of afterward, and nobody knew what had happened to them. And they drank more of that curious wine, and they made images and worshipped them, and nurse showed me how the images were made one day when we were out for a walk, and we passed by a place where there was a lot of wet clay. So nurse asked me if I would like to know what those things were like that they made on the hill, and I said yes. Then she asked me if I would promise never to tell a living soul a word about it, and if I did I was to be thrown into the black pit with the dead people, and I said I wouldn't tell anybody, and she said the same thing again and again, and I promised. So she took my wooden spade and dug a big lump of clay and put it in my tin bucket, and told me to say if anyone met us that I was going to make pies when I went home. Then we went on a little way till we came to a little brake growing right down into the road, and nurse stopped, and looked up the road and down it, and then peeped through the hedge into the field on the other side, and then she

said, “Quick!” and we ran into the brake, and crept in and out among the bushes till we had gone a good way from the road. Then we sat down under a bush, and I wanted so much to know what nurse was going to make with the clay, but before she would begin she made me promise again not to say a word about it, and she went again and peeped through the bushes on every side, though the lane was so small and deep that hardly anybody ever went there. So we sat down, and nurse took the clay out of the bucket, and began to knead it with her hands, and do queer things with it, and turn it about. And she hid it under a big dock-leaf for a minute or two and then she brought it out again, and then she stood up and sat down, and walked round the clay in a peculiar manner, and all the time she was softly singing a sort of rhyme, and her face got very red. Then she sat down again, and took the clay in her hands and began to shape it into a doll, but not like the dolls I have at home, and she made the queerest doll I had ever seen, all out of the wet clay, and hid it under a bush to get dry and hard, and all the time she was making it she was singing these rhymes to herself, and her face got redder and redder. So we left the doll there, hidden away in the bushes where nobody would ever find it. And a few days later we went the same walk, and when we came to that narrow, dark part of the lane where the brake runs down to the bank, nurse made me promise all over again, and she looked about, just as she had done before, and we crept into the bushes till we got to the green place where the little clay man was hidden. I remember it all so well, though I was only eight, and it is eight years ago now as I am writing it down, but the sky was a deep violet blue, and in the middle of the brake where we were sitting there was a great elder tree covered with blossoms, and on the other

side there was a clump of meadowsweet, and when I think of that day the smell of the meadowsweet and elder blossom seems to fill the room, and if I shut my eyes I can see the glaring blue sky, with little clouds very white floating across it, and nurse who went away long ago sitting opposite me and looking like the beautiful white lady in the wood. So we sat down and nurse took out the clay doll from the secret place where she had hidden it, and she said we must "pay our respects," and she would show me what to do, and I must watch her all the time. So she did all sorts of queer things with the little clay man, and I noticed she was all streaming with perspiration, though we had walked so slowly, and then she told me to "pay my respects," and I did everything she did because I liked her, and it was such an odd game. And she said that if one loved very much, the clay man was very good, if one did certain things with it, and if one hated very much, it was just as good, only one had to do different things, and we played with it a long time, and pretended all sorts of things. Nurse said her great-grandmother had told her all about these images, but what we did was no harm at all, only a game. But she told me a story about these images that frightened me very much, and that was what I remembered that night when I was lying awake in my room in the pale, empty darkness, thinking of what I had seen and the secret wood. Nurse said there was once a young lady of the high gentry, who lived in a great castle. And she was so beautiful that all the gentlemen wanted to marry her, because she was the loveliest lady that anybody had ever seen, and she was kind to everybody, and everybody thought she was very good. But though she was polite to all the gentlemen who wished to marry her, she put them off, and said she couldn't make up her mind, and she

wasn't sure she wanted to marry anybody at all. And her father, who was a very great lord, was angry, though he was so fond of her, and he asked her why she wouldn't choose a bachelor out of all the handsome young men who came to the castle. But she only said she didn't love any of them very much, and she must wait, and if they pestered her, she said she would go and be a nun in a nunnery. So all the gentlemen said they would go away and wait for a year and a day, and when a year and a day were gone, they would come back again and ask her to say which one she would marry. So the day was appointed and they all went away; and the lady had promised that in a year and a day it would be her wedding day with one of them. But the truth was, that she was the queen of the people who danced on the hill on summer nights, and on the proper nights she would lock the door of her room, and she and her maid would steal out of the castle by a secret passage that only they knew of, and go away up to the hill in the wild land. And she knew more of the secret things than anyone else, and more than anyone knew before or after, because she would not tell anybody the most secret secrets. She knew how to do all the awful things, how to destroy young men, and how to put a curse on people, and other things that I could not understand. And her real name was the Lady Avelin, but the dancing people called her Cassap, which meant somebody very wise, in the old language. And she was whiter than any of them and taller, and her eyes shone in the dark like burning rubies; and she could sing songs that none of the others could sing, and when she sang they all fell down on their faces and worshipped her. And she could do what they called shib-show, which was a very wonderful enchantment. She would tell the great lord, her father, that she wanted to go into the

woods to gather flowers, so he let her go, and she and her maid went into the woods where nobody came, and the maid would keep watch. Then the lady would lie down under the trees and begin to sing a particular song, and she stretched out her arms, and from every part of the wood great serpents would come, hissing and gliding in and out among the trees, and shooting out their forked tongues as they crawled up to the lady. And they all came to her, and twisted round her, round her body, and her arms, and her neck, till she was covered with writhing serpents, and there was only her head to be seen. And she whispered to them, and she sang to them, and they writhed round and round, faster and faster, till she told them to go. And they all went away directly, back to their holes, and on the lady's breast there would be a most curious, beautiful stone, shaped something like an egg, and colored dark blue and yellow, and red, and green, marked like a serpent's scales. It was called a glame stone, and with it one could do all sorts of wonderful things, and nurse said her great-grandmother had seen a glame stone with her own eyes, and it was for all the world shiny and scaly like a snake. And the lady could do a lot of other things as well, but she was quite fixed that she would not be married. And there were a great many gentlemen who wanted to marry her, but there were five of them who were chief, and their names were Sir Simon, Sir John, Sir Oliver, Sir Richard, and Sir Rowland. All the others believed she spoke the truth, and that she would choose one of them to be her man when a year and a day was done; it was only Sir Simon, who was very crafty, who thought she was deceiving them all, and he vowed he would watch and try if he could find out anything. And though he was very wise he was very young, and he had a smooth, soft face like a girl's, and he pretended, as

the rest did, that he would not come to the castle for a year and a day, and he said he was going away beyond the sea to foreign parts. But he really only went a very little way, and came back dressed like a servant girl, and so he got a place in the castle to wash the dishes. And he waited and watched, and he listened and said nothing, and he hid in dark places, and woke up at night and looked out, and he heard things and he saw things that he thought were very strange. And he was so sly that he told the girl that waited on the lady that he was really a young man, and that he had dressed up as a girl because he loved her so very much and wanted to be in the same house with her, and the girl was so pleased that she told him many things, and he was more than ever certain that the Lady Avelin was deceiving him and the others. And he was so clever, and told the servant so many lies, that one night he managed to hide in the Lady Avelin's room behind the curtains. And he stayed quite still and never moved, and at last the lady came. And she bent down under the bed, and raised up a stone, and there was a hollow place underneath, and out of it she took a waxen image, just like the clay one that I and nurse had made in the brake. And all the time her eyes were burning like rubies. And she took the little wax doll up in her arms and held it to her breast, and she whispered and she murmured, and she took it up and she laid it down again, and she held it high, and she held it low, and she laid it down again. And she said, "Happy is he that begat the bishop, that ordered the clerk, that married the man, that had the wife, that fashioned the hive, that harbored the bee, that gathered the wax that my own true love was made of." And she brought out of an aumbry a great golden bowl, and she brought out of a closet a great jar of wine, and she poured some of the wine into the bowl,

and she laid her manikin very gently in the wine, and washed it in the wine all over. Then she went to a cupboard and took a small round cake and laid it on the image's mouth, and then she bore it softly and covered it up. And Sir Simon, who was watching all the time, though he was terribly frightened, saw the lady bend down and stretch out her arms and whisper and sing, and then Sir Simon saw beside her a handsome young man, who kissed her on the lips. And they drank wine out of the golden bowl together, and they ate the cake together. But when the sun rose there was only the little wax doll, and the lady hid it again under the bed in the hollow place. So Sir Simon knew quite well what the lady was, and he waited and he watched, till the time she had said was nearly over, and in a week the year and a day would be done. And one night, when he was watching behind the curtains in her room, he saw her making more wax dolls. And she made five, and hid them away. And the next night she took one out, and held it up, and filled the golden bowl with water, and took the doll by the neck and held it under the water. Then she said—

> Sir Dickon, Sir Dickon, your day is done,
> You shall be drowned in the water wan.

And the next day news came to the castle that Sir Richard had been drowned at the ford. And at night she took another doll and tied a violet cord round its neck and hung it up on a nail. Then she said—

> Sir Rowland, your life has ended its span,
> High on a tree I see you hang.

And the next day news came to the castle that Sir Rowland had been hanged by robbers in the wood. And

at night she took another doll, and drove her bodkin right into its heart. Then she said—

> Sir Noll, Sir Noll, so cease your life,
> Your heart pierced with the knife.

And the next day news came to the castle that Sir Oliver had fought in a tavern, and a stranger had stabbed him to the heart. And at night she took another doll, and held it to a fire of charcoal till it was melted. Then she said—

> Sir John, return, and turn to clay,
> In fire of fever you waste away.

And the next day news came to the castle that Sir John had died in a burning fever. So then Sir Simon went out of the castle and mounted his horse and rode away to the bishop and told him everything. And the bishop sent his men, and they took the Lady Avelin, and everything she had done was found out. So on the day after the year and a day, when she was to have been married, they carried her through the town in her smock, and they tied her to a great stake in the market-place, and burned her alive before the bishop with her wax image hung round her neck. And people said the wax man screamed in the burning of the flames. And I thought of this story again and again as I was lying awake in my bed, and I seemed to see the Lady Avelin in the market-place, with the yellow flames eating up her beautiful white body. And I thought of it so much that I seemed to get into the story myself, and I fancied I was the lady, and that they were coming to take me to be burnt with fire, with all the people in the town looking at me. And I wondered whether she cared, after all the strange things she had

done, and whether it hurt very much to be burned at the stake. I tried again and again to forget nurse's stories, and to remember the secret I had seen that afternoon, and what was in the secret wood, but I could only see the dark and a glimmering in the dark, and then it went away, and I only saw myself running, and then a great moon came up white over a dark round hill. Then all the old stories came back again, and the queer rhymes that nurse used to sing to me; and there was one beginning "Halsy cumsy Helen musty," that she used to sing very softly when she wanted me to go to sleep. And I began to sing it to myself inside of my head, and I went to sleep.

The next morning I was very tired and sleepy, and could hardly do my lessons, and I was very glad when they were over and I had had my dinner, as I wanted to go out and be alone. It was a warm day, and I went to a nice turfy hill by the river, and sat down on my mother's old shawl that I had brought with me on purpose. The sky was gray, like the day before, but there was a kind of white gleam behind it, and from where I was sitting I could look down on the town, and it was all still and quiet and white, like a picture. I remembered that it was on that hill that nurse taught me to play an old game called "Troy Town," in which one had to dance, and wind in and out on a pattern in the grass, and then when one had danced and turned long enough the other person asks you questions, and you can't help answering whether you want to or not, and whatever you are told to do you feel you have to do it. Nurse said there used to be a lot of games like that that some people knew of, and there was one by which people could be turned into anything you liked and an old man her great-grand-mother had seen had known a girl who had been turned into a large snake. And there was another very ancient game of dancing and

winding and turning, by which you could take a person out of himself and hide him away as long as you liked, and his body went walking about quite empty, without any sense in it. But I came to that hill because I wanted to think of what had happened the day before, and of the secret of the wood. From the place where I was sitting I could see beyond the town, into the opening I had found, where a little brook had led me into an unknown country. And I pretended I was following the brook over again, and I went all the way in my mind, and at last I found the wood, and crept into it under the bushes, and then in the dusk I saw something that made me feel as if I were filled with fire, as if I wanted to dance and sing and fly up into the air, because I was changed and wonderful. But what I saw was not changed at all, and had not grown old, and I wondered again and again how such things could happen, and whether nurse's stories were really true, because in the daytime in the open air everything seemed quite different from what it was at night, when I was frightened, and thought I was to be burned alive. I once told my father one of her little tales, which was about a ghost, and asked him if it was true, and he told me it was not true at all, and that only common, ignorant people believed in such rubbish. He was very angry with nurse for telling me the story, and scolded her, and after that I promised her I would never whisper a word of what she told me, and if I did I should be bitten by the great black snake that lived in the pool in the wood. And all alone on the hill I wondered what was true. I had seen something very amazing and very lovely, and I knew a story, and if I had really seen it, and not made it up out of the dark, and the black bough, and the bright shining that was mounting up to the sky from over the great round hill, but had really seen it in truth,

then there were all kinds of wonderful and lovely and terrible things to think of, so I longed and trembled, and I burned and got cold. And I looked down on the town, so quiet and still, like a little white picture, and I thought over and over if it could be true. I was a long time before I could make up my mind to anything; there was such a strange fluttering at my heart that seemed to whisper to me all the time that I had not made it up out of my head, and yet it seemed quite impossible, and I knew my father and everybody would say it was dreadful rubbish. I never dreamed of telling him or anybody else a word about it, because I knew it would be of no use, and I should only get laughed at or scolded, so for a long time I was very quiet, and went about thinking and wondering; and at night I used to dream of amazing things, and sometimes I woke up in the early morning and held out my arms with a cry. And I was frightened, too, because there were dangers, and some awful thing would happen to me, unless I took great care, if the story were true. These old tales were always in my head, night and morning, and I went over them and told them to myself over and over again, and went for walks in the places where nurse had told them to me; and when I sat in the nursery by the fire in the evenings I used to fancy nurse was sitting in the other chair, and telling me some wonderful story in a low voice, for fear anybody should be listening. But she used to like best to tell me about things when we were right out in the country, far from the house, because she said she was telling me such secrets, and walls have ears. And if it was something more than ever secret, we had to hide in brakes or woods; and I used to think it was such fun creeping along a hedge, and going very softly, and then we would get behind the bushes or run into the wood all of a sudden, when we were sure that none was watching

us; so we knew that we had our secrets quite all to ourselves, and nobody else at all knew anything about them. Now and then, when we had hidden ourselves as I have described, she used to show me all sorts of odd things. One day, I remember, we were in a hazel brake, overlooking the brook, and we were so snug and warm, as though it was April; the sun was quite hot, and the leaves were just coming out. Nurse said she would show me something funny that would make me laugh, and then she showed me, as she said, how one could turn a whole house upside down, without anybody being able to find out, and the pots and pans would jump about, and the china would be broken, and the chairs would tumble over of themselves. I tried it one day in the kitchen, and I found I could do it quite well, and a whole row of plates on the dresser fell off it, and cook's little work-table tilted up and turned right over "before her eyes," as she said, but she was so frightened and turned so white that I didn't do it again, as I liked her. And afterward, in the hazel copse, when she had shown me how to make things tumble about, she showed me how to make rapping noises, and I learnt how to do that, too. Then she taught me rhymes to say on certain occasions, and peculiar marks to make on other occasions, and other things that her great-grandmother had taught her when she was a little girl herself. And these were all the things I was thinking about in those days after the strange walk when I thought I had seen a great secret, and I wished nurse were there for me to ask her about it, but she had gone away more than two years before, and nobody seemed to know what had become of her, or where she had gone. But I shall always remember those days if I live to be quite old, because all the time I felt so strange, wondering and doubting, and feeling quite sure at one

time, and making up my mind, and then I would feel quite sure that such things couldn't happen really, and it began all over again. But I took great care not to do certain things that might be very dangerous. So I waited and wondered for a long time, and though I was not sure at all, I never dared to try to find out. But one day I became sure that all that nurse said was quite true, and I was all alone when I found it out. I trembled all over with joy and terror, and as fast as I could I ran into one of the old brakes where we used to go—it was the one by the lane, where nurse made the little clay man—and I ran into it, and I crept into it; and when I came to the place where the elder was, I covered up my face with my hands and lay down flat on the grass, and I stayed there for two hours without moving, whispering to myself delicious, terrible things, and saying some words over and over again. It was all true and wonderful and splendid, and when I remembered the story I knew and thought of what I had really seen, I got hot and I got cold, and the air seemed full of scent, and flowers, and singing. And first I wanted to make a little clay man, like the one nurse had made so long ago, and I had to invent plans and stratagems, and to look about, and to think of things beforehand, because nobody must dream of anything that I was doing or going to do, and I was too old to carry clay about in a tin bucket. At last I thought of a plan, and I brought the wet clay to the brake, and did everything that nurse had done, only I made a much finer image than the one she had made; and when it was finished I did everything that I could imagine and much more than she did, because it was the likeness of something far better. And a few days later, when I had done my lessons early, I went for the second time by the way of the little brook that had led me into a strange country. And I

followed the brook, and went through the bushes, and beneath the low branches of trees, and up thorny thickets on the hill, and by dark woods full of creeping thorns, a long, long way. Then I crept through the dark tunnel where the brook had been and the ground was stony, till at last I came to the thicket that climbed up the hill, and though the leaves were coming out upon the trees, everything looked almost as black as it was on the first day that I went there. And the thicket was just the same, and I went up slowly till I came out on the big bare hill, and began to walk among the wonderful rocks. I saw the terrible voor again on everything, for though the sky was brighter, the ring of wild hills all around was still dark, and the hanging woods looked dark and dreadful, and the strange rocks were as gray as ever; and when I looked down on them from the great mound, sitting on the stone, I saw all their amazing circles and rounds within rounds, and I had to sit quite still and watch them as they began to turn about me, and each stone danced in its place, and they seemed to go round and round in a great whirl, as if one were in the middle of all the stars and heard them rushing through the air. So I went down among the rocks to dance with them and to sing extraordinary songs; and I went down through the other thicket, and drank from the bright stream in the close and secret valley, putting my lips down to the bubbling water; and then I went on till I came to the deep, brimming well among the glittering moss, and I sat down. I looked before me into the secret darkness of the valley, and behind me was the great high wall of grass, and all around me there were the hanging woods that made the valley such a secret place. I knew there was nobody here at all besides myself, and that no one could see me. So I took off my boots and stockings, and let my feet down

into the water, saying the words that I knew. And it was not cold at all, as I expected, but warm and very pleasant, and when my feet were in it I felt as if they were in silk, or as if the nymph were kissing them. So when I had done, I said the other words and made the signs, and then I dried my feet with a towel I had brought on purpose, and put on my stockings and boots. Then I climbed up the steep wall, and went into the place where there are the hollows, and the two beautiful mounds, and the round ridges of land, and all the strange shapes. I did not go down into the hollow this time, but I turned at the end, and made out the figures quite plainly, as it was lighter, and I had remembered the story I had quite forgotten before, and in the story the two figures are called Adam and Eve, and only those who know the story understand what they mean. So I went on and on till I came to the secret wood which must not be described, and I crept into it by the way I had found. And when I had gone about halfway I stopped, and turned round, and got ready, and I bound the handkerchief tightly round my eyes, and made quite sure that I could not see at all, not a twig, nor the end of a leaf, nor the light of the sky, as it was an old red silk handkerchief with large yellow spots, that went round twice and covered my eyes, so that I could see nothing. Then I began to go on, step by step, very slowly. My heart beat faster and faster, and something rose in my throat that choked me and made me want to cry out, but I shut my lips, and went on. Boughs caught in my hair as I went, and great thorns tore me; but I went on to the end of the path. Then I stopped, and held out my arms and bowed, and I went round the first time, feeling with my hands, and there was nothing. I went round the second time, feeling with my hands, and there was nothing. Then I went round the third time,

feeling with my hands, and the story was all true, and I wished that the years were gone by, and that I had not so long a time to wait before I was happy for ever and ever.

Nurse must have been a prophet like those we read of in the Bible. Everything that she said began to come true, and since then other things that she told me of have happened. That was how I came to know that her stories were true and that I had not made up the secret myself out of my own head. But there was another thing that happened that day. I went a second time to the secret place. It was at the deep brimming well, and when I was standing on the moss I bent over and looked in, and then I knew who the white lady was that I had seen come out of the water in the wood long ago when I was quite little. And I trembled all over, because that told me other things. Then I remembered how sometime after I had seen the white people in the wood, nurse asked me more about them, and I told her all over again, and she listened, and said nothing for a long, long time, and at last she said, “You will see her again.” So I understood what had happened and what was to happen. And I understood about the nymphs; how I might meet them in all kinds of places, and they would always help me, and I must always look for them, and find them in all sorts of strange shapes and appearances. And without the nymphs I could never have found the secret, and without them none of the other things could happen. Nurse had told me all about them long ago, but she called them by another name, and I did not know what she meant, or what her tales of them were about, only that they were very queer. And there were two kinds, the bright and the dark, and both were very lovely and very wonderful, and some people saw only one kind, and some only the other, but some saw them both. But usually the dark appeared first,

and the bright ones came afterward, and there were extraordinary tales about them. It was a day or two after I had come home from the secret place that I first really knew the nymphs. Nurse had shown me how to call them, and I had tried, but I did not know what she meant, and so I thought it was all nonsense. But I made up my mind I would try again, so I went to the wood where the pool was, where I saw the white people, and I tried again. The dark nymph, Alanna, came, and she turned the pool of water into a pool of fire . . .

EPILOGUE

"THAT'S A VERY queer story," said Cotgrave, handing back the green book to the recluse, Ambrose. "I see the drift of a good deal, but there are many things that I do not grasp at all. On the last page, for example, what does she mean by 'nymphs'?"

"Well, I think there are references throughout the manuscript to certain 'processes' which have been handed down by tradition from age to age. Some of these processes are just beginning to come within the purview of science, which has arrived at them—or rather at the steps which lead to them—by quite different paths. I have interpreted the reference to 'nymphs' as a reference to one of these processes."

"And you believe that there are such things?"

"Oh, I think so. Yes, I believe I could give you convincing evidence on that point. I am afraid you have neglected the study of alchemy? It is a pity, for the symbolism, at all events, is very beautiful, and moreover if you were acquainted with certain books on the subject, I could recall to your mind phrases which might explain a good deal in the manuscript that you have been reading."

"Yes; but I want to know whether you seriously think that

there is any foundation of fact beneath these fancies. Is it not all a department of poetry; a curious dream with which man has indulged himself?"

"I can only say that it is no doubt better for the great mass of people to dismiss it all as a dream. But if you ask my veritable belief—that goes quite the other way. No; I should not say belief, but rather knowledge. I may tell you that I have known cases in which men have stumbled quite by accident on certain of these 'processes,' and have been astonished by wholly unexpected results. In the cases I am thinking of there could have been no possibility of 'suggestion' or subconscious action of any kind. One might as well suppose a schoolboy 'suggesting' the existence of Æschylus to himself, while he plods mechanically through the declensions.

"But you have noticed the obscurity," Ambrose went on, "and in this particular case it must have been dictated by instinct, since the writer never thought that her manuscripts would fall into other hands. But the practice is universal, and for most excellent reasons. Powerful and sovereign medicines, which are, of necessity, virulent poisons also, are kept in a locked cabinet. The child may find the key by chance, and drink herself dead; but in most cases the search is educational, and the phials contain precious elixirs for him who has patiently fashioned the key for himself."

"You do not care to go into details?"

"No, frankly, I do not. No, you must remain unconvinced. But you saw how the manuscript illustrates the talk we had last week?"

"Is this girl still alive?"

"No. I was one of those who found her. I knew the father well; he was a lawyer, and had always left her very much to herself. He thought of nothing but deeds and leases, and the news came to him as an awful surprise. She was missing one morning; I suppose it was about a year after she had written what you have read. The

servants were called, and they told things, and put the only natural interpretation on them—a perfectly erroneous one.

"They discovered that green book somewhere in her room, and I found her in the place that she described with so much dread, lying on the ground before the image."

"It was an image?"

"Yes, it was hidden by the thorns and the thick undergrowth that had surrounded it. It was a wild, lonely country; but you know what it was like by her description, though of course you will understand that the colors have been heightened. A child's imagination always makes the heights higher and the depths deeper than they really are; and she had, unfortunately for herself, something more than imagination. One might say, perhaps, that the picture in her mind which she succeeded in a measure in putting into words, was the scene as it would have appeared to an imaginative artist. But it is a strange, desolate land."

"And she was dead?"

"Yes. She had poisoned herself—in time. No; there was not a word to be said against her in the ordinary sense. You may recollect a story I told you the other night about a lady who saw her child's fingers crushed by a window?"

"And what was this statue?"

"Well, it was of Roman workmanship, of a stone that with the centuries had not blackened, but had become white and luminous. The thicket had grown up about it and concealed it, and in the Middle Ages the followers of a very old tradition had known how to use it for their own purposes. In fact it had been incorporated into the monstrous mythology of the Sabbath. You will have noted that those to whom a sight of that shining whiteness had been vouchsafed by chance, or rather, perhaps, by apparent chance, were required to blindfold themselves on their second approach. That is very significant."

"And is it there still?"

"I sent for tools, and we hammered it into dust and fragments.

“The persistence of tradition never surprises me,” Ambrose went on after a pause. “I could name many an English parish where such traditions as that girl had listened to in her childhood are still existent in occult but unabated vigor. No, for me, it is the ‘story’ not the ‘sequel,’ which is strange and awful, for I have always believed that wonder is of the soul.”

JENNY GREENTEETH

ALISON LITTLEWOOD

Alison Littlewood's latest novel, *Mistletoe*, is a seasonal ghost story with glimpses into the Victorian era. Her first book, *A Cold Season*, was described as "perfect reading for a dark winter's night." Other titles include *Path of Needles*, *The Unquiet House*, *Zombie Apocalypse! Acapulcalypse Now*, *The Hidden People*, and *The Crow Garden*.

Her short stories have been chosen for a number of "year's best" anthologies and published in her collections *Quieter Paths* and *Five Feathered Tales*. She has won the Shirley Jackson Award for Short Fiction.

"When I started thinking about Jenny Greenteeth," explains the author, "I had a series of disjointed images in my mind that wouldn't leave me: a murky, secluded pool; a disembodied voice, singing; and three sisters, afraid of the spirit of the pool yet continually drawn to its home.

"I didn't get much beyond that until I considered that perhaps their story didn't take place in the present day, and perhaps one of the girls wasn't a sister at all. The image of a lonely evacuee came together with those already in my mind, as images sometimes will, and became this story."

THE BOMBS HAD stopped falling. That was the first thing that struck Alice when the train pulled away, its smoke and roar fading into the distance, and she looked out across nothing but green for miles around.

The silence crept into her, like long fingers snaking down her throat, and she felt she no longer knew how to breathe. The air had no smell in it, not even the taint of coal and steam any longer. Sometimes, at home in London, she hadn't been clear whether the percussion of incendiaries was really still happening or if the sound had lodged in her mind, an endless battle that wouldn't stop. It at once terrified her and awoke a nameless longing that wore the face of her mother, solemn and silent as the fields that stretched away.

She didn't know where she was. She only knew she'd been told to alight here, and so here she stood with her bag at her feet and a cardboard sign hanging around her neck, over the gold cross that had been her mother's. An evacuee.

"Oreet, lass."

The voice was rough, as was the man who'd spoken. His dark hair was plastered to his sweaty forehead and his chin was rough too, speckled with stubble. He spat out more words she couldn't make sense of, she caught something about a cart, and he picked up her bag and she followed him. He put her things into the back of a wooden wagon, jerking his hand toward the seat, and she stepped up too. He sat in front of her, his back turned, and took up the reins. She stared at the horse's fat chestnut haunches as they rolled and shifted and pulled her away from everything she had known.

Across a cobbled yard, a place of squawking chickens and straw and spattered dirt, she reached the farmhouse. The mother wore an apron that wasn't really white and a distracted expression. Strands of hair hung in her face. She said that Alice was welcome but she didn't smile, and when she said that Alice was their only billet, she pulled a face as if the word had a nasty

taste.

Then two girls came rushing into the kitchen.

One was a little taller than Alice, with mousy curls: Olive. The other was rather shorter with plump, unformed features and a gap-toothed smile: Betty.

"Come wi' me," Olive said. "I'll show you summat."

She turned and ran up the stairs before Alice could reply. She was tired and hungry and she could smell bread somewhere in the kitchen, but she followed the girl anyway, into a cramped room with two little beds squeezed into it.

"Mam said *you* should share," Olive announced, "but we said *we* would. We're together, aren't we, Bet?"

Betty nodded. Alice could already see that nodding was what she did.

"I've got this." Olive went to a drawer and pulled out a little circle of plaited string with deep-green beads threaded onto it.

"It's a bracelet," she said. "I made one for me and one for Bet. You can have this un."

She held it out. Alice reached for it, giving a little smile in spite of herself. She was almost touching it when Olive snatched it back, shoving it deep into her pocket. She grabbed her sister's arm and they ran, thundering back down the stairs, their laughter still ringing around the low beams.

THERE WAS REAL milk, squirted warm into a pail. Real eggs gathered in a bowl, never reported for the rationing. There were sheep with yellow eyes and the stamping, farting horse and a goose that hissed as loud as a train. There was the father, always doing something, gesturing this way and that to a limping boy who was the farmhand. Their voices confused her. It was hard to follow the accent. They used phrases her parents never had; words were like things stuck in their throats they struggled to expel. They laughed at her: her shoes too dainty for the yard, the way she said

Lancashire instead of *Lancasheer*, her fear of the old dog with his dripping red tongue.

After she'd fed the chickens and dusted the rooms and kneaded the dough to the mother's satisfaction, Alice was told she may go. Olive and Betty were sitting at the old deal table that was much scarred from a knife, shelling peas, Betty swinging her legs in time with a tune creaking from the wireless.

Olive slipped from her chair, sidled up to Alice, and poked her arm. "We'll show you summat you'll like," she said.

Their mother smiled as if that's what she wanted to see, and Olive led the way from the kitchen.

They went across the yard and into the lane. Then they climbed a narrow stile and tramped across a field, the path clogged and slippery with mud, toward a little stand of trees. But it wasn't the trees they'd come to see. When they reached their edge, Alice saw the shattered remnants of a drystone wall, a hole in the ground a bit like a crater, and in it, a dank pool surrounded by mossy stones. The water looked slimy. The sun didn't seem to reach it, but when she looked up, the sky was a flat gray; she couldn't see the sun at all.

The whole place was drab and dull and she didn't know why they'd come here. It was cold too, a nip in the air, but then, it always seemed colder here than it had been at home.

Olive spoke as if she was proud of the sight. "This was part of the river, once. The Dee. Not anymore, though."

That much was obvious to Alice. The pool was stagnant. It didn't flow anywhere, didn't make a sound. There was a smell to it. The water wasn't blue but green, and she couldn't see into it.

"It's where Jenny Greenteeth lives."

Alice didn't look around. This was it, then, some new trick they wanted to play on her.

"We hear singing here sometimes," Betty piped up. Had her sister primed her to say the words?

"Oh aye. But we don't see her. She hasn't got a face, not really.

She's got long, straggly hair and bony arms and claws for hands, and she'll grab you and pull you under if she can. Then she'll soften you up and suck the flesh from your bones." Olive giggled.

Betty looked afraid. She hung from her sister's arm, standing a little behind her.

"You have to give her stuff." Olive stared into the water. "An offering. You don't get owt for nowt, my dad says. Have *you* got a dad, Alice?"

Alice thought of her father, the last time she had seen him. He'd been given a few days' leave for her mother's funeral. He had held her hand but hadn't comforted her. He'd sat her on his knee as he used to do, but it hadn't been the same. *He* wasn't the same. It was as if he'd been replaced by someone who only looked like him, but he didn't play with her hair or tickle her anymore. He didn't speak. There were no words inside him. When she twisted on his lap and looked at him, he didn't seem to see her. He was staring out of the window as if it were another country, and he didn't answer when she whispered his name.

She forced herself to focus once more on the pool. The water was greened and slimy with some sort of plant that was growing there, floating just beneath the surface. She imagined ragged hair among the weeds, the discolored ivory of teeth gleaming from the moss. She frowned. She knew that death came in fire and cracking stone and blackened skies. It hadn't occurred to her that it could also be cold.

"If you give her summat," Olive went on, "'appen she'll give summat back to you. Summat you lost. Summat you want."

She pulled something from her pocket. Alice knew, before she caught the girl's sly look, what it was: the macramé bracelet that had been offered to her and snatched away.

Olive's grin broadened as she drew back her hand and threw it out into the pool. The water took it with a low *gloop* and Alice peered in, wondering if she could see it there, caught on the pondweed. She took a step forward, trying to make out what it

was she saw just beneath the surface, and Olive shrieked in her ear.

"Don't go near! Or Jenny Greenteeth'll pull you in!"

The sisters hugged each other, grinning with delicious fear. Alice didn't move. She didn't feel afraid. There were worse things, she knew, and anyway, she was too busy wondering: What exactly was it that Olive had offered to the spirit of the pool? What was it she had asked for in return?

"Now you," Olive said.

She stepped in front of Alice, scowling, and Alice saw that the girl's cheeks were too flat, her nose too sharp, her eyes the color of mud. Is that why she was so mean all the time? Betty lined up next to her, her eyes the same hue as her sister's.

Alice shook her head. What could she offer? What was there that Jenny Greenteeth could possibly want? In spite of herself, her hand stole to her neck and rested on the little gold cross that had been her mother's.

"That." Olive pointed.

Alice shook her head.

"That's what she wants."

Again, Alice shook her head, and Olive's expression darkened. "You're cursed, now," she spat. "Jenny Greenteeth is going to get you!"

She ran away with her sister, hand in hand, both of them shrieking and laughing their triumph into the air.

THAT NIGHT, ALICE was sent early to her room. She lay in the little bed staring up into the eaves and listened to the raised voices snaking from between the floorboards.

"It's no good skrikin'. Go there again and I'll clout thee one."

A low wail.

The mother's milder tones. Did she sound half amused? "That story's supposed to keep you away from water, not drag you

where you don't belong."

She couldn't hear Olive's reply.

The mother again. "There's your sister to think on. An' London girls can't swim. I'll want your word on it, now."

At some point during the softer words that followed, the sound of footsteps on the stairs, Alice closed her eyes, thinking of Jenny Greenteeth: her hair like weeds, her too-long fingers tipped with broken nails, and no face that she could see; but she had eyes, rimmed with baleful yellow, and when she opened her lips . . .

She shook her head, half asleep and half awake, and felt hands reaching for her, dragging her down. She couldn't breathe. There was a smell; she couldn't get any air. She felt fingers closing on her, bony yet swollen, and she awoke to see a face up close to hers, not green but black.

She let out a shrill sound and it jerked away, just as she saw another face near hers. This one was pale and smudged but she recognized Olive, still holding the gas mask she'd been pressing against Alice's mouth.

The girl smirked and retreated into the dark and the door closed behind her. Still Alice could barely keep herself from screaming at the memory of the mask, the terrible blankness in its eyes.

She took long gulps of air that smelled of nothing but the rabbit stew they'd had for tea, and she tried to think of anything else. For a long time, she couldn't.

Then, as she started to drift, a memory came.

That night. The air raid. The siren ripping the night apart, shaking their souls. Dragging them all from their beds. Her mother pulling her into the street, wrapping her nightie closer around her, throwing a blanket over her shoulders.

"I have to help Mrs. Beattie. Her legs. She can't manage the stairs so fast."

Alice had heard the words, though half the vowels were lost to the mechanical scream rising into the air. She knew all about Mrs.

Beattie's legs: fat. Swollen. The veins showing blue-green under the surface of blotched, gray skin.

She felt her mother thrust her hand into that of another neighbor, from the family two doors down.

"Go now," she said. "I'll be along soon."

The last promise she made to Alice. *I'll be along soon.*

ALICE STOOD AT the edge of the pool and touched the cross that hung at her throat and thought about her mother.

Her mother had touched the necklace too, often, without thinking about it. Alice knew she sometimes hadn't even been aware of doing it. It was what her mother did when she wanted to be reminded of God.

Say your prayers, her mother had said, every time she'd kissed Alice goodnight. And Alice had, though they hadn't seemed to help. They didn't stop the bombs from falling or keep the things that were taken away from leaving. They didn't give anything back. Alice had sometimes stopped the whispered words before she'd finished, just to listen to the silence they left behind.

In London, God lived in buildings, not pools of water. There were stone churches for Him everywhere and yet how easily they had toppled, their stones shattered as easily as a promise.

Now she raised her hands and found the clasp at the back of her neck, releasing it. She curled her fingers around the necklace —it had no weight at all—and remembered what it had been like to have someone to tell her to say her prayers. To have arms wrapped around her, a kind face pressed against her own. Someone who smiled at her, who didn't roll the word *billet* around on their tongue.

With one jerking movement, she threw the necklace toward the pool. It made a brief glitter in the air and she pictured the dirty water sucking it in—*gloop*—but it didn't. Her offering fell short. It landed on the banking at the edge of the pool and glinted softly

from the grass.

Alice stepped forward. It no longer felt as if she were quite alone, and she leaned toward it. How long were Jenny Greenteeth's arms? Long, she imagined, with fingertips like hooks, ready to catch and pull.

She imagined being held under the slimy surface, her face hidden among the weeds. How long would she feel it on her skin before she stopped being conscious of it? How long before she opened her mouth and tried to breathe the nasty stuff?

A bubble rose to the surface with a soft *glug* and she watched a ripple spread, gradually subsiding amid the pondweed. Then the fronds moved, shifting as if something had stirred beneath, turning restless in the water.

She caught her breath and stepped back. Maybe it wouldn't matter. Jenny would surely find the necklace. Her offering would count after all.

She forced herself to turn her back on the pool, telling herself that it wasn't her mother she'd left at the water's cold edge, just in time to see a small figure sneaking away between the trees.

THE NEXT MORNING Alice was splashing her face in cold water from a ewer when she heard the mother calling Olive's name. The tone wasn't right, and in the next moment her door opened.

"Is she in here with you?"

Alice frowned, confused. "She's with Betty. They share."

The door closed in her face and she heard footsteps on the narrow landing and raised voices. One of them was Betty's. Then the child started to cry.

Alice dressed and went downstairs to find everyone already in the kitchen, the father stomping in his boots, mud flaking from them to the clean flags. Alice knew, when the mother didn't tell him not to, how worried she was. Only Olive wasn't there and Alice felt her absence in the sharp looks that leaped around the

room.

"I'll go and check the sheds," the father said.

The mother didn't say anything about that either, twisting her hands in her apron as if shoving the words down deep. Betty wrapped her arms around her waist, and her mother looked down at the child's head as if she didn't know what she was doing there, alone, not half of a whole any longer.

Alice ran to the corner and got her shoes. She half expected someone to stop her, but no one seemed to notice she was there at all. When the father went out, she followed and ran across the yard. She already knew where Olive would be.

She made her way across the field, surrounded by the long grass and its whispers. The air was cold on her face, but she didn't mind. If she was cold and didn't feel it, that would mean she was dead, after all, and that would be awful, like—

An image flashed before her: Mrs. Beattie's legs, swollen and mottled and transparent, blue veins pressing upward from beneath. She shook the thought away. She had almost reached the trees and didn't feel alone any longer, and she swallowed, hard, before stepping out of the light, under their branches.

Everything was green: the water, the stones, the shadows. She felt the underwater light on her skin like reaching fingers and she shuddered.

Olive was there, floating on the surface like a rag doll cast aside. At first Alice thought her face was black, then realized she was lying facedown, looking at—what? Her hair, darkened with water, fanned about her head. Her clothes looked heavy, tainted green, but somehow they hadn't yet dragged her down.

Alice didn't scream, but Betty did. Alice hadn't even realized the child had followed until she felt her arms flailing at her. Alice gasped at air that was too warm and heady with growth. She couldn't move as Betty filled the air with her siren sound and then she forced herself to turn.

The others were already running toward them along the path.

Even the old dog lolloped by the side of its master, the teeth sharply white against its red mouth. When they came, though, the dog wouldn't go near, staying quite motionless at the edge of the trees, only its nose twitching.

Alice opened her mouth to cry out a warning but the father didn't listen. He waded into the pool, his trespass sending loud splashes into the air, and he grabbed his daughter's arm and pulled her from the water. He ended up kneeling on the banking, his arms around her limp form.

Olive didn't look as if the flesh had been sucked from her bones. Perhaps she hadn't yet been softened enough. She looked as she had before, except that her face was slack. It was still her, though, just the same; only her eyes had changed.

Olive stared at the sky. She didn't see anything any longer, Alice could tell. What had been her last sight? Perhaps she hadn't seen anything at all—only felt long arms snaking around her, clasping an arm or an ankle before the world tilted. Or perhaps she had. Perhaps she alone knew what Jenny Greenteeth looked like.

Olive's mother knelt at her side, her mouth opening and closing, no sound coming out. Betty's wails had stopped too.

Alice stepped forward. Betty grabbed at her in a new panic but Alice pulled away and took another step toward the pool. She only wanted to see, and she did: the necklace she had left there, her mother's gift, was gone.

IT WASN'T DIFFICULT to sneak out. Alice had feared she wouldn't be able to, but the mother had taken to her room, her eyes wide and shocked-looking, as if she hadn't known that people could die. When Alice slipped across the yard, Betty followed, running after her as if Alice were her sister and it was unthinkable she'd go anywhere alone.

Alice took the little hand. Were they friends now? She

supposed they were, and for a moment she wondered if that was what had come in exchange for the necklace. She shook her head.

They climbed the stile and picked their way across the muddy field. Betty hadn't asked where they were going and she didn't say a word, though her grip tightened on Alice's fingers as they drew closer to the trees. Alice could already smell the water, its cool, green sourness, and as its taint reached her she thought she heard something too: a soft voice, singing?

She frowned. Betty had spoken of this once, but Betty was only little. She'd probably mistaken the breeze soughing in the branches for the soft lilt of music, like someone humming through a mouth full of water.

She slowed her steps, as did Betty, who pulled back on her arm. Alice dragged her along the last few paces. Stepping beneath the trees it was cooler at once, as if they were being immersed.

Alice kept her gaze on the ground, though she heard a soft splashing, as of the surface being disturbed—*a fish*, she told herself as her heart began to beat faster, though surely no fish lived in such a pool—then came the muted sound of water dripping onto stones sheathed in moss.

When she looked up there was a figure standing under the trees, its form like their branches, dull under the shadows. Was that hair twined about its shoulders? Were those fingers, bent like twigs, and a little plaited bracelet wound about the bone? Were those eyes gleaming from amid the moss?

They blinked and fixed on Betty; eyes that were the color of mud.

Alice opened her mouth but no sound came out. She realized she had let go of Betty's hand and she reached for her with fingers that grasped like claws but closed on nothing. A movement at her side followed by the rustle of long grass told her that Betty was already running away.

It was better to be alone. She had made her offering. The pact was between the two of them.

I'll be along soon.

And she realized that the figure waiting for her wasn't as it had first seemed. It wasn't Olive, wasn't even pretending to be her any longer.

Alice opened her mouth again, meaning to say all that she needed to say, everything that was inside her. It was too much to encapsulate: the touch of her mother's hand on her hair; the shine in her eyes when she looked at her daughter. All of those things that were tiny and yet everything and wordless. All she had desired. The things she had asked for when she offered up the most precious thing she had, leaving it at the edge of the pool.

If you give her summat, 'appen she'll give summat back to you. Summat you lost. Summat you want.

The spirit of the pool was taller than Olive would ever be. Her hair was dark, curling now over her shoulders, water running from it as Alice watched. Her eyes were no longer mud-colored. And her face—

But Alice knew what her face looked like. Still, she was thin; so very thin.

She reached out with one long arm, long fingers, and beckoned.

Alice imagined what it would be like to have that arm around her and she shivered. She imagined being embraced, not in the warmth of her mother's kitchen, but in the cold pool. Is that what her mother would have wanted for her? Perhaps it was only as Olive had said: Jenny Greenteeth was a wicked creature with no face of her own, none she hadn't borrowed from whatever she could scavenge: a touch. A corpse. A golden necklace.

She thought of the offering she had made. Not just a *thing*, an object treasured and thrown away, but the love she had wrapped around it. The longing for her mother—and something else: the awful wish she had buried beneath the one she had worded in her mind.

She closed her eyes and saw not her mother's face, but her

father's. The cold way he'd stared out of the window. The way he had become something she couldn't name, just under the surface of himself; some new creature lurking beneath his arms, his legs, his face.

And she knew what it was she had truly asked of Jenny Greenteeth, besides the need to see her mother once more; the way she had begged her to make it possible that Alice would never have to go home again.

ALL I EVER SEE

MIKE CHINN

Mike Chinn has, over the years, published more than sixty short stories and scripted a few comic strips. He has edited three volumes of *The Alchemy Press Book of Pulp Heroes*, along with the anthology *Swords Against the Millennium* for The Alchemy Press. His Damian Paladin collection, *The Paladin Mandates*, was short-listed for the British Fantasy Award in 1999, and a second Paladin collection, *Walkers in Shadow*, was published in 2017 by Pro Se Productions, along with a revised and expanded edition of the first book.

He sent Sherlock Holmes to the moon in *Vallis Timoris* and has two short story collections in print, *Give Me These Moments Back* and *Radix Omnium Malum*. In 2018 he published his first Western, *Revenge is a Cold Pistol*, while *The Griffon* reimagines Arch Whitehouse's classic 1930s pulp adventure character, bringing her right up to date and taking to the skies again in the twenty-first century.

"Like so many other writers of horror and the weird, I'm fascinated by Forteana and strange phenomena," reveals the author. "While seeking inspiration for this story, I came across reports of two-dimensional black stick figures, dating from the 1980s to the present day. At

first I thought they were related to the recent internet 'Slenderman' memes, but clearly they go back much further.

"What interested me about these stick figures is, although the incidents are reported very sporadically and are consequently almost unheard of, all the reports have common themes. Unlike with UFOs—where everyone knows what you're supposed to see—these witnesses appear to be sharing a similar experience quite independent of each other. Although exactly *what* that experience is . . . who knows?"

BRYAN HAD TO admit he was a little disappointed. He thought they'd be able to see the chalk lines of the White Horse from the road, but clearly not. Jen pulled into the car park—the disabled one, Bryan noted with a sting of resentment—and found a space. For such a pokey car park, it wasn't all that full. Time of year, he thought.

Jen opened her door and Bryan unsnapped his safety belt. She turned to him, with a finger already raised. "No. Wait."

He bit back a retort and sat fuming in his seat while she fetched a wheelchair from the back of their white Qashqai. Jen unfolded and wheeled the chair to the passenger door.

"Is it okay if I open the door by myself?" he muttered through the open window. Jen gave him a patient, pained look, but she held the door open as he stepped down from the car and walked to the wheelchair. Bryan lowered himself onto the seat without using his arms, showing her how much in control he was.

Once he was seated, Jen slammed the car door shut. Too hard, as usual. Bryan tried not to wince; she might misinterpret it.

"I brought my sticks," he reminded her, not that she'd need a hint. They'd been bickering about it for the past three days.

"I know, love." Jen turned his wheelchair, aiming the

Qashqai's key fob over her shoulder to lock the doors. "And I know you could probably get up there—but what about coming back? If the climb tires you out too much, I wouldn't be able to carry you."

Bryan didn't respond. It wouldn't help. They'd been going in circles even before they left home. Jen's argument never leaving its rut: the walk up to the Horse might be too much for him; she wasn't young enough to carry him back, if it came to that; it was better to use the chair from the start. . . . Banging his head against a wall would have been more productive.

She knew perfectly well it didn't work like that. If he was going to get tired, tomorrow would be the time—and they'd be on their way back home by then. It never seemed to occur to her that all the arguments might be just as exhausting for him. Bryan sometimes wondered if his wife enjoyed being his carer just a little too much, so much so she wouldn't acknowledge he was almost fully recovered. It made him uncomfortable: both that he could think it, and that it might be true.

Jen wheeled him out onto a country road before turning right onto the path that led up to the famous chalk figure. The day was clear and bright, if cold. Bryan's exhaled breath curled around his mouth. There were a few people out on the hill, bundled in their winter clothes even though it had officially been spring for two weeks. The trampled grass didn't look as though it had woken up from its winter torpor.

"You need to lose some weight, love." Jen sounded cheerful, despite the criticism in the words.

If you didn't insist on trundling me everywhere, thought Bryan, maybe the exercise would help.

They crested the hill and there before them, cut into the hill, was the Uffington White Horse. It was hard to see all of it, even up here. Whoever had originally laid it out had intended it to be fully appreciated only from above. Like the Nazca Lines, Bryan thought. By gods, not people.

“Not quite what I expected,” Jen was saying. Bryan ignored her and the tone of dignified disappointment she’d mastered over the past six years. It wasn’t like he’d imagined either, but he was damned if he’d let her know that.

He stood, abruptly, pushing the wheelchair back with his hands. Jen complained as it smacked into her.

“Bryan—what are—?”

“I came here to walk it, and that’s what I’m bloody well going to do.” He took a couple of steps, the tired grass still springy beneath his feet. He felt fine.

“Bryan—”

“I’m not a fucking invalid!” He half turned, staring back at her and the hurt expression on her face. “Just leave it! For once!”

He was aware of a couple, several yards away, staring at him. Bryan ignored them, ramming his hands inside his coat pockets and looking at the patterns of chalk. He was a couple of feet away from the head. Perfect.

Bryan walked alongside the white pattern, following its outline. It was like a circular path, an incomplete maze. He made for the long, slender curve of the Horse’s neck.

“Be careful, love!” Jen tailed him, pushing the wheelchair.

Like he was about to sprint off, or roll down the hill. “You know, some people aren’t even sure this is actually supposed to be a horse. A dog, perhaps—or even a saber-toothed cat! It’s got fangs—look . . .” He pointed back to a corner of the head and laughed at the thought. “Imagine that.”

Jen nodded, saying nothing for once. She’d known about his interest in what she called *the old stuff* for years, long before they’d married. The archaeology, paleontology, the odd bit of cryptozoology. She tolerated it, even more so after he’d fallen sick: it gave his mind something to do while the rest of him fell apart. It had never interested her, though, not even slightly.

Bryan paced out the neck. He still felt good: no tiredness, no cramp, no aches anywhere. He knew Jen was fretting over

nothing. He could have walked up from the car and back with no problem. Maybe even without his crutches.

He reached the body of the carving. The chalk outline broadened out. After all these years he was finally on the White Horse. Immersed in one of Britain's oldest Neolithic monuments. At least they hadn't cordoned it off yet, unlike Stonehenge.

Something buzzed past him. He glanced up, thinking it was too cold for insects. It buzzed by him again, although he couldn't see anything. The buzz moved past his face, so loud and clear he automatically swatted, instantly feeling like an idiot.

"You okay, love?" asked Jen, catching up.

"Fine. There's just a bee or something being a pain."

Jen took a step back. She loathed bees. And wasps. "I don't see it!"

The buzzing was growing louder. Bryan stopped, looked around; momentarily entertaining the unlikely thought that there was a swarm nearby.

The noise was so loud it drowned out everything. Bryan thought Jen was speaking, but he couldn't make out any words. The buzz filled his head. It made him dizzy. He felt sick. Black motes danced on the periphery of his vision, growing denser.

A moment later everything went dark—but the buzz finally ceased.

"I KNEW THAT would happen!"

Jen stood next to the bed, looking like she'd rather be pacing. Bryan was lying down—his wife had insisted—but he saw no reason. He felt fine. He was feeling better than he had in weeks. He sat up, starting to swing his legs off the mattress.

"Oh no, mister!" Jen grabbed his shoulders and pushed him back down.

"For god's sake, Jen—!" Bryan sucked in a breath. He wanted to yell at her to keep her hands to herself but fought the urge. No

point making things even worse.

Jen stepped back. “What?”

Bryan counted off several seconds before speaking. “Don’t ever go for a job as a nurse. The NHS has enough problems.”

A hurt look filled her face. *Martyred*, Bryan would have called it. Another expression she’d perfected.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“You passed out up there. I had to drag you out of the chalk depression and into the wheelchair . . .”

“If you’d left me for a couple of moments, I’d probably have come round. Whatever happened to your first aid training? You know: raise the feet to get blood to the head. I must have missed the week that covered dumping unconscious patients into a wheelchair. And manhandling ones trying to get out of bed.”

Jen’s face hardened. “You ungrateful bastard.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I should be grateful for being treated like a cripple—?”

“You have chronic fatigue syndrome—!”

“Suspected!” he interrupted. “Suspected CFS. Or is it mild ME, or a mystery virus—doctors love to blame mystery viruses! Or even lupus, as that one quack suggested. I’ve been knackered for six years and no one can really say why. But I’m getting better, Jen. I’m almost one hundred percent back to normal, and as far as I can see the only thing stopping me going those last few points is you!”

She went pale. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

And it was, he knew. “Yes. Sorry, love. I appreciate what you’ve done for me since I got sick, honestly. But I’m no longer sick. I’m better. Almost. I need to live a normal life again, get fit. Lose that weight you were moaning about. I can’t do that if I’m wrapped in cotton wool.”

She continued to stare down at him, mouth set, silent. Eventually she nodded sharply. “Fine.” She stamped from the room, slamming the door shut.

Bryan stayed lying down for a while longer, not sure what Jen was going to do. Would she come back? If so, when? Eventually he swung his legs off the bed and carefully stood up. His head stayed clear: no dizziness or nausea. The edges of his vision flickered for a moment, like something was dancing there, almost out of sight, and then cleared.

"See," he told the small room, "I'm fine."

They were staying for a couple of nights at a pub on the outskirts of Uffington that offered bed and breakfast. Jen had spent days looking for a place with enough disabled access to make her happy, then loudly fussed about the steep, narrow stairs leading up to their room. They hadn't bothered Bryan. He descended them now and made his way into the empty bar. It was decorated in clichéd beams and horse brasses, no doubt for the tourists, with several framed snapshots of the Horse spaced around the rendered and white-emulsioned walls. Twee as hell, but the place had a CAMRA listing and served a decent local IPA, as well as above-average pub grub. Bryan ordered a pint, asking for a beef sandwich as an afterthought, and sat himself by a small corner window. There was a traditional open fire, burning logs, filling the bar with heat and the scent of resin.

His sandwich arrived. It was packed with thick slices of beef and smeared all over with horseradish sauce. Sheer indulgence, and a treat after the diet he'd endured for the past couple of years. One specialist they'd consulted had a theory Bryan's condition was somehow allergy related, but after a year eating the blandest food imaginable—with no improvement—Bryan had declared the idea stupid and demanded he go back on a normal diet. Jen, typically, hadn't let the idea go and continued to dish up tasteless pap. He'd wondered if she was one of those who equated suffering with health. If it didn't taste bad, it wasn't doing you any good.

Well, to hell with that, Bryan thought, finishing his sandwich with some regret. He hadn't managed to sneak a curry or decent chili past Jen yet, but he would. He'd had enough.

Bryan drank his IPA, savoring every mouthful, and stood up to get another. Something moved under the wooden bench running under the window. A black cat, he thought. He waited, but it stayed in shadow, refusing to show itself.

The woman serving at the bar ran the pub with her husband. She had bright-yellow hair and a ready smile. “Your cat?” asked Bryan as she pulled his pint.

She glanced up. “Cat? Where?”

Bryan nodded toward the window. “Under the bench there . . .”

She stared across the room, squinting. “We don’t allow pets in here,” she muttered, returning her attention to the glass. “If you see it again, kick it out, there’s a dear.”

Bryan paid up and returned to his seat. He glanced down at the shadows under the bench. After a moment, a black shape slid across his vision.

He crouched, ready to grab the cat and haul it out if necessary. “Come on, puss. You’re not welcome in these here parts.”

The shape moved forward, almost into daylight, and Bryan reached out a friendly hand. “That’s a good moggy. Out you—”

He snatched his hand away and sat back down. He took a good pull on his pint, hand shaking.

“You okay, love?” called the woman at the bar. “Is there a cat? Did it scratch you?”

“No . . . no.” Bryan’s voice was steadier than his hand. “It . . . it was a spider. I hate spiders.”

She laughed. “You and me both, dear.”

Bryan held his glass in both hands, frightened it might slip. The shape under the bench stepped out further into the light and peered around. Bryan couldn’t help thinking it was looking at him. After a moment it turned and slid back into the shadows.

Except *slid* wasn’t exactly the word. Bryan couldn’t describe how it actually moved, except it was slow, and unnatural. He was equally hard-pressed to say what it was. He knew what it looked

like—but that was ridiculous.

It was a crude outline, a two-dimensional stick figure. Identical to the Uffington Horse. Except it was completely black, and less than two feet long.

BRYAN STAYED IN the bar, nursing his second pint, wondering if he should have another. Or if he shouldn't. He'd moved shortly after seeing . . . whatever he thought he'd seen. The bar was still empty, there were plenty of places to sit. Places that didn't have spiders, he'd half-heartedly explained to the woman at the bar. He settled down closer to the door, at a small round table that only had two simple stools with it. No shadows; nowhere anything could hide.

Maybe it had been the heat from the open fire, combined with the drink, giving him a sort of waking dream. It was an experience he'd never had before. Listlessness, aches and pains, periods when he just couldn't face getting out of bed, sure—but never hallucinations. He worried if it mightn't be a fresh symptom to baffle the doctors.

Whatever, he wasn't going to tell Jen. It would be something else for her to hold over him; another stick to keep him cowed.

She reappeared as twilight set in. The lights had just been switched on. Bryan looked at his watch, amazed so much time had passed. Jen stepped through the door, coming to a halt when she saw him. She stared at his still-three-quarters-full glass.

"How many of those have you had?"

"This is my second," he said. "I sort of lost interest in it." Which was more or less the truth.

Jen pursed her lips, obviously wondering whether to believe him or not. "Would you like a coffee?" she asked, eventually.

Bryan stared up at the board behind the bar. "I think they do hot chocolate. I fancy something sweet." Perhaps his blood sugars were low, although he still felt fine. Just a little shaken.

Jen went up to the bar. Bryan heard her ordering a latte and

hot chocolate. She came back and took the second stool. She still looked angry. But she'd looked like that almost since the day Bryan had fallen ill. "You all right, Bryan? You look a bit pale." Her tone didn't quite match the concerned words.

"Hmm? No—a bit tired, that's all." Imagining the glint of triumph about to spark in her eyes, he added: "Not like that. Just ordinary tiredness." He moved his glass aside. "Maybe this was a bit strong for me. No longer used to it."

A tight smile pulled at Jen's mouth. "You never listen."

Their hot drinks were brought over, along with paper tubes of sugar and some small amaretti biscuits.

"Do you want to go back up there?" Jen asked as she dipped a biscuit into her coffee.

It took Bryan a moment to work out what she meant. "Do you?" He was surprised she'd asked.

"No." She bit into the softened biscuit and chewed it. "But we're here for you." She made it sound like a penance she was undergoing. "Well?"

"It's a bit late now."

"I meant tomorrow, after we check out. We can drive up on the way home. It's not much of a detour."

He took a slow drink of his hot chocolate, enjoying its cloying sweetness. "If you're sure."

"I wouldn't suggest it otherwise."

"Okay then. Thanks." He did his best to sound grateful, to try and give her something to lighten her mood. She jerked her head in a wordless nod and picked up her cup.

THE DAY WAS cold. Even colder than the previous one. Yesterday's clear sky had given way to a gunmetal overcast that felt like it was pressing on Bryan's head. He stood next to the White Horse's neck, gazing thoughtfully at the chalk inlay.

"Turn and face me," Jen called.

Bryan did. He looked at her—a few feet away and down from him. She was holding up her phone, trying to frame him against the hill and carving.

"Try frowning a bit more," she muttered, eyes fixed on the phone's screen. "It'll match the miserable weather."

Bryan held still while she snapped off a few images. There was still something twitching at the edge of his vision, and he heard buzzing again. The insects in Oxfordshire were definitely hardier than the ones back in the Midlands.

When Jen said she was done, Bryan started walking, once again following the hill carving. Hands in coat pockets, he hunched against a cold that felt like it was growing more intense. He paced out the curves of the White Horse, acutely aware that Jen and he were the only people in sight. Occasionally he'd glance down toward the Qashqai and found himself wishing he was inside it; that both of them were already on the motorway. He'd been talking about doing this trip for years. *Once you're fit enough*, Jen said more than once, *we'll finally go to Uffington*. Now he couldn't wait to leave.

Jen stood where he'd left her, swiping through her stored images. "This light's terrible," she complained.

Bryan paused. "What's up?"

"Something wrong with the contrast," she said, not looking up from her phone. "The pictures are a bit shadowy."

Bryan said nothing. He'd never had much faith in the quality of images produced by cell phones.

"You nearly done?" Jen added.

"Yeah." He wasn't. Far from it. But his heart was no longer in it. "Let's get back to the car."

Jen headed north, toward the M40. Bryan would have turned west and made for Swindon, keeping off the B roads as much as possible, but Jen enjoyed them. Her opinion of satnavs was about the same as Bryan's views on cell phones.

The trees and bushes lining the road in irregular clumps were

stark and skeletal. If there was any green at all, Bryan couldn't make it out as they sped past. The dark clouds cast a premature twilight over the countryside. It wasn't quite midday, but he guessed darkness wouldn't be all that far away today. At least it wasn't raining.

For the first few miles Jen said nothing. Bryan figured she was still sulking—not that she'd see it that way. He didn't remember her being so combative before he went down with . . . whatever he had. Did she resent him being sick because she'd had to spend so much time nursing him? Even though she obviously couldn't get out of that groove.

She spoke suddenly, jolting him out of his brooding. "You know, I almost left you."

Bryan felt like he'd been gut-punched. He stared at her profile: her face was set rigid, expressionless, her eyes fixed on the narrow road. "What?"

"It's true. I did. Then you came down with the CFS, and I couldn't bring myself to go."

"And you tell me this just as we're driving down a country road?" He wanted to laugh. "Pull over! Pull over now!"

The Qashqai bounced to a stop next to a rusty gate, just off the narrow lane. A leafless tree bowed over the car's rear end, long bare twigs clutching at the roof. Jen finally took her eyes off some point in the distance and looked directly at him. She turned off the engine. "Okay. What?"

"What?" He fought not to yell at her. He was starting to feel dizzy, and there was a ringing in his ears. "You just tell me you wanted to leave six years ago but didn't because I inconveniently went down with something! And you say 'what'!"

"It's not like that—"

"Then tell me! For fuck's sake, Jen . . . !"

Her face was sunken, drawn. Bryan remembered, when they first met, how much she'd reminded him of Jenny Agutter. Even the same first name.

“Was there someone . . . ?” he started to say.

She shook her head. “There was no one. There’s never been anyone. But . . .” She lay back in her seat, head crushed against the headrest. “I don’t know. I can’t justify it but . . . the marriage felt empty. Flat. We were just two people sharing the same house, the same bed. We weren’t married; not anymore. There seemed no point, so . . .” She shrugged.

“What, then I fell ill and suddenly there was a point again?” He wanted to lash out, physically and verbally.

Jen raised her hands in a vague gesture. “I don’t know. I . . . I’m not proud of it, Bryan. But you had your chance at the truth yesterday. Now it’s mine.”

“Well, I hope you feel better for it!”

“No. Not really. You feel any better for what you said?”

He didn’t reply. She probably knew the answer anyway.

“So, what happens now?” He asked the question reluctantly, not wanting the answer. “Now I’m better—or as good as. Is this—*was* this— our last holiday together?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. But I think I’ve been doing my best to put the decision off.”

Yes, thought Bryan, in your own sweet, caring way. He tried to put a positive spin on that. If Jen was trying to dodge the question, maybe—

A long thin hand tapped his window. He flinched, crying out.

“What’s up?” From Jen’s expression, Bryan imagined she thought he was trying to change the topic.

“That—!” Bryan started to point, realizing it was the end of a naked branch, its twigs caught in a breeze. He felt stupid. “Sorry. Getting nervy in my old age.”

Yet he couldn’t shake the impression that there was movement just beyond the gate. Figures, hard to see in the growing darkness. He glanced skyward: the clouds were almost black.

“We’d better move. Looks like we’re in for some heavy rain. These lanes are a nightmare in the dark.”

Sparing him a last glance, Jen started up the Qashqai and turned back onto the road.

"We still need to talk, Bryan."

That much was obvious. "When we get home," he muttered and reached to switch on the radio. The reception was awful. No matter how much Bryan changed frequencies, he couldn't find any station that didn't keep breaking up. The weather? Geography? Bit of both? He found an oldies program for a few moments—local, probably, with a stronger signal—and enjoyed a few bars of an ancient Status Quo record he vaguely remembered from his youth. Their brief psychedelic, pre-double-denim era. It fizzled out into some kind of feedback. Bryan gave up and switched the radio off.

Jen turned on the headlights. It really was turning dark. It could have been midnight.

"How long to the motorway?" Bryan asked.

"About half an hour."

The atmosphere in the car was beyond oppressive. If they made it home without one of them screaming in sheer frustration, Bryan thought it would be a miracle. He stared out of his window, but the outside had become a featureless blur. Sky and landscape were indistinguishable. It was an endless, monochrome background strip, like the ones used in the American television cartoons of his childhood.

There were still things jumping at the corner of his vision, too. He kept thinking it was a leafless tree or bush, or someone in a field, but every time he looked, there was nothing there. Just gray rushing by. He thought his ears might be ringing too—a bit like he was about to pass out or throw up—but he couldn't be sure above the road noise. Perhaps, after all, Jen had been right: he really wasn't up to the trip.

More movement snagged his attention. He half turned, knowing whatever it was would vanish the moment he looked for it.

There was something black and spiky keeping pace with the

car. It looked like the bottom half of a black stick figure, just the legs, moving with odd, ponderous leaps. There was no way it could be moving fast enough to keep up.

Bryan squeezed his lips together, reluctant to admit what he thought he was seeing. He had no idea how far away the apparition was—in the fading light, perspective was completely gone. It could have been a spider, clinging to the window by a thread, which made sense, or much farther away. Which would have made it . . . big. And that was ridiculous.

He turned his head away, hunkering down in his seat. He tried to turn off the ringing in his ears, which he wasn't even certain was there at all. What did tinnitus sound like?

"Tired?" asked Jen. Bryan nodded, glad of an excuse. "Me too. This road's longer than I remember."

"It's the half-light," said Bryan. "It muddles you." He wasn't sure if he was talking about Jen, or his own confusion.

Movement to his left tried to attract his attention. Bryan did his best not to look. Eventually he couldn't resist.

Caught in the headlights' backwash was a scarecrow of a shape. Tall, impossibly thin, and moving with a peculiar grace that didn't prevent it from loping across the ground at speed. It reminded Bryan of the stick figure they used on Roger Moore's *The Saint* TV series. Without the halo, and black rather than white. It also seemed to be just as flat: a two-dimensional figure drawn against the gray backdrop.

Bryan watched it come closer to his window, or it grew taller—it was impossible to be sure which. It seemed to just be chasing the car: a surreal dog out for a run. For some reason, Bryan thought it was oblivious to the people on board.

The muted ringing in Bryan's ears screeched to a jagged peak. He winced in pain and hissed. Jen glanced at him—more in query than concern.

Outside, the stick man's attitude had changed. Something so subtle that Bryan's conscious senses couldn't pick it out. But it

seemed to be looking at Bryan directly, even though it had no face, no features. It had seen Bryan; knew he was aware of it. And it wasn't pleased.

It loped closer, bending so low it could have been running on all four limbs. The flat, black head was almost touching the passenger window. Bryan whimpered.

Jen looked at him again, this time in irritation. "What?"

He kept his eyes on the road ahead, telling himself there was nothing gliding alongside them, no smooth, dark cutout pressed up against the glass. "Perhaps you'd better speed it up a bit? Get to the motorway before it's completely dark?"

"Unlike you," she muttered. "If I do over forty at night, you usually start bitching." Even so he heard the engine picking up revs.

How had she not seen it? Bryan wouldn't turn, but he felt the thing's presence, its closeness. He still wasn't certain if it was curious or angry, but he was positive he didn't want to find out. Meanwhile a small part of his brain was marveling that he'd accepted the insanity as real, and was reacting in a rational manner. Was that how every madman coped? Treating their delusions as normal, considering anyone who didn't view the world from their perspective as the crazies?

After a mile or so, Bryan felt the presence ease off. Slowly, neck moving as though every muscle was in spasm, he turned back to the window. There was nothing: just the outside sliding past. Every time a bush or tree was caught in the headlights, Bryan had to fight the urge to flinch.

"You sure you're all right with my driving this speed?" asked Jen.

Bryan just nodded.

"You seem jumpy."

He said nothing, biting his lips. In the contrasted darkness he saw a towering stick figure, looking down from a rise. It was a cell phone mast, surely?

“I can slow down if you like.”

Jen kept glancing across at him. Probably convincing herself he was having some kind of relapse. “No. Let’s get home be—”

Glowing in the headlights, an impossibly thin figure had stepped out into the road. Or flowed. Bryan stared back, willing it to vanish. He knew they weren’t going to hit it.

“What the hell!” Jen slammed on the brakes. The car swerved. Bryan was half thrown forward before his seatbelt caught, squeezing out a harsh breath.

The gangling figure swerved out of sight. The only thing Bryan saw was a line of bushes, stark in the headlights. Jen spun the wheel helplessly; the Qashqai was out of control. It lurched. Bryan was flung against his door. Jen was swearing: an endless stream of obscenities. There was the sound of an impact and the headlights went out. Bryan’s face was suddenly enveloped in a stifling pale cushion. He couldn’t breathe.

The car rolled to a halt, engine racing.

Panicked, Bryan clawed at the airbag even though it was already deflating. Jen’s bag was collapsing too. She lay back in her seat, eyes shut, mouth slack.

“Jen?” Bryan unclipped his seatbelt, leaning across to get a better look. “Jen!”

She was breathing, slow and shallow. That was something. She was out cold, though. Remember how long she’s unconscious, he told himself as he turned off the engine and searched for her cell phone. Emergency services will want to know.

The phone was showing no reception.

But that’s crazy, he thought. They’d just driven by a mast.

He opened his door; it was stiff, reluctant to move. The car had come to a halt in a field. A few yards behind it was a metal gate, buckled and hanging off its hinges. It could have been the same one they’d stopped next to earlier. The field was rutted by the Qashqai’s wheels.

Bryan leaned against the car’s side, holding up Jen’s phone.

Still no reception. He raised it up more, knowing it would make no difference.

There was a low range of hills in front of him, slate gray in the poor light. He'd have to climb them, hope he could get a signal higher up.

He leaned back inside the car. Jen didn't seem to have moved. "I need to call an ambulance, love," he said, slowly and carefully. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you for a bit. We're in a dead spot—I need to find a signal . . ."

Bryan thought she groaned softly. He took it for an acknowledgment.

Even though he knew he had to get going, he was reluctant to leave her. Weren't you supposed to monitor the unconscious? But then he'd never be able to ring for an ambulance.

"Back soon as I can, love," he said, making himself move before indecision took over.

He headed for the hills, holding the phone's screen up just in case it suddenly showed reception. He tried to shrink his world down to that small, glowing rectangle. The field didn't exist anymore than the stick figures moving at the edge of his vision. If he didn't acknowledge them, they wouldn't realize he was there. Or the car. He'd be okay. Jen would be okay.

The rise was slow and gentle, even so he felt himself growing tired. His legs grew more reluctant with each step. His head swam; he was starting to feel sick. Despite the cold he was sweating heavily. The clothing under his coat was damp.

He reached the hilltop suddenly. The ground seemed to roll away and tip into another uneven slope, heading down. It was too dark to make out the landscape below him, but he thought he spotted an occasional light—either singly or in small clusters.

He checked the phone again. There was a single bar. He tapped in the three digits and held the phone to his ear. There was no ringing tone—just a faint, insect-like buzz. He tried again. Nothing. He was about to try a third time when the phone went

completely dead.

Bryan almost screamed, tempted to hurl the useless chunk of plastic into the darkness. He'd have to get back to Jen, make sure she was all right. There wasn't much point hanging about up here.

He turned, and his right foot slipped on the grass. It skidded into a depression and he staggered, almost falling. Bryan glanced down, expecting to see a rabbit hole. It was white chalk, almost luminescent in the semi-dark. Part of the White Horse. He could make out more of it, stretching away on either side, pale and ghostly.

How the hell had they managed to get back here? Jen was driving north, not south!

The buzz rose up around him again. Millions of crickets, each trying to out-rasp the others. It filled Bryan's head, making it hard to think. Bile rose in his throat. At some point he knew he'd sunk to his knees, unable to stand, drained of all energy.

He was lying full out on the chalk outline. It was the head, he thought: those two odd teeth or whiskers were a few feet away. The grass was flickering in the breeze.

There was no breeze.

Bryan squinted. Each dark blade of grass bobbed and lurched with a life of its own, part of a black stick figure. An arm, a length of torso, a featureless head. He propped himself on shaking arms and looked around. As far as he could see, up to where the ground blended with the darkness, the grass was swarming, surging. Right on the limits of visibility, little stick men pulled themselves upright and pranced about the chalk outline, their movements slow and unnatural. Or were they so small? In the premature evening, what light there was played tricks.

Occasionally one would stop and turn in Bryan's direction. There was something predatory in the movement. He wanted to be out of their sight, back in the car with Jen, but he was scared to move, not wanting to attract any more attention than he already had.

The buzz spun up from the wriggling ground: a watchful, threatening drone.

He flattened himself to the ground, inching along the chalk outline. He'd have to crawl onto the grass at some point, but he dared not. Only the Uffington Horse felt safe: white against the black. He worked his way around the head until he could look down toward the Qashqai. It was just a pale, gray blur in the gloom. He tried not to imagine the grass around its tires wriggling; black skeletal figures of indeterminate height stalking past. Looking in at Jen.

He'd left his door open . . .

Bryan knew he had to move, but he was terrified, exhausted. He could feel his body shutting down the way it used to. Soon all he'd be able to do was sleep.

There was something out in the darkness beyond the car. Something even blacker, elongated, moving in a slow, peculiar manner. It was coming closer—or getting bigger; Bryan could no longer tell. As it loomed out of the murky light, it became easier to see but no easier to make sense of.

It was another black outline, with no more depth than a charcoal sketch. Man-shaped? Or horse? With each bizarre step it changed outline, bending into itself, flowing like ink. It surged up the slope toward Bryan, defying his eyes and reason. It reared over him, passed him by. For an instant it seemed to pause and glance down before moving on.

The buzzing in Bryan's head abruptly ceased.

The evening was calm. The grass hung limp and tired. Nothing moved.

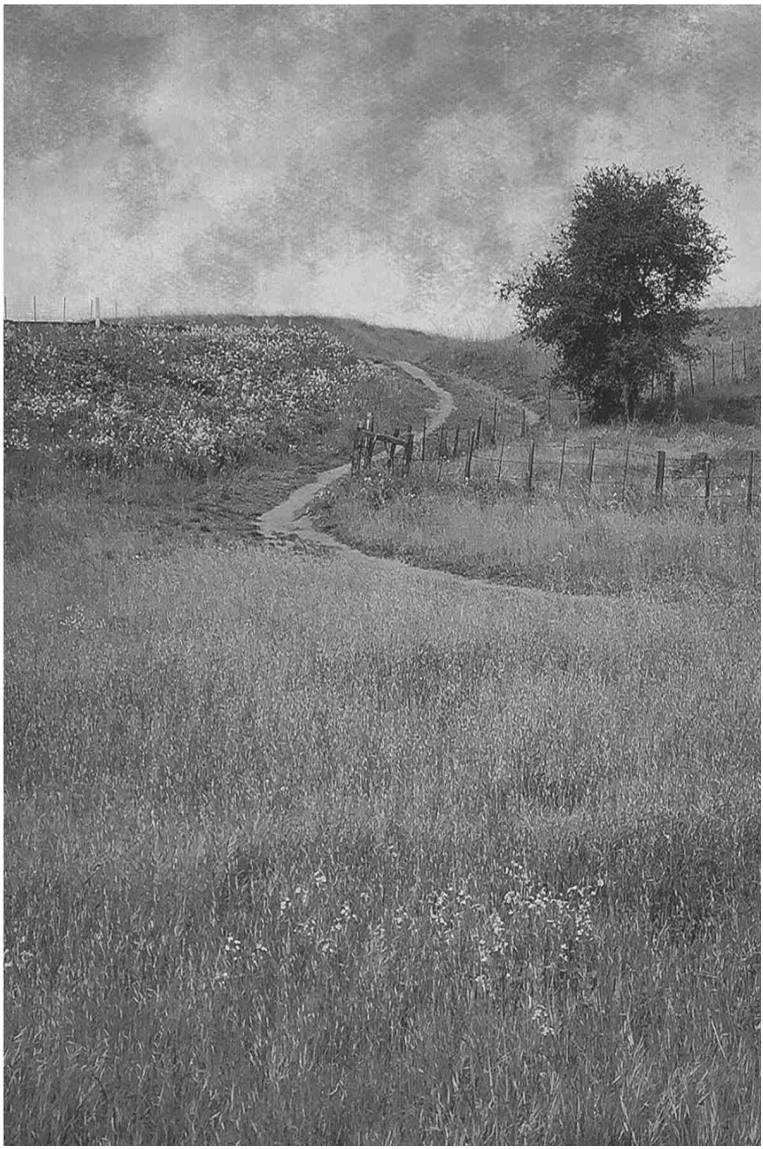
After a minute had crawled by, Bryan hauled himself upright and made one faltering step. And another. He stepped out of the chalk outline, almost stumbling over the raised grassy edge. Gradually, certain he was about to fall with each step and never get up again, Bryan weaved his way back down to the car. He felt like he was walking down a cliff face. He had no more substance

than the two-dimensional things up around the Horse.

The door was still open. He thought he could make out Jen's shadowy outline propped against her seat. He grabbed hold of the open door, hanging on as his legs finally gave out.

"I'm back, love," he slurred. If she heard him, she said nothing. "Don' we make a grea' couple, eh?" He tried to heave himself toward the passenger seat. "Jus' don' say I tol' you so . . ."

The buzzing re-erupted in his head, threatening to explode it. Behind him, far beyond the reach of the White Horse, something reared.



WAILING WELL

M. R. JAMES

M. (Montague) R. (Rhodes) James (1862–1936) was provost of King's College, Cambridge. Most of his ghost stories were occasional pieces, written for friends or college magazines, and were collected in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911), *A Thin Ghost and Others* (1919), and *A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories* (1925).

Widely regarded as one of the finest authors of supernatural fiction in the English language, James is credited as the originator of the "antiquarian ghost story," replacing the Gothic horrors of the previous century with more contemporary settings for his subtle hauntings.

Many of his stories were originally written as Christmas entertainments and were read aloud by the author to selected gatherings of friends.

James believed that it was requisite for this type of story "that the ghost should be malevolent or odious: amiable and helpful apparitions are all very well in fairy tales or in local legends, but I have no use for them in a fictitious ghost story."

First published as a 157-copy stand-alone book in

1928 by the Mill House Press in the Berkshire Village of Stanford Dingley, “Wailing Well” is one of the author’s lesser-known tales. An abridged version was read by actor Robert Powell as part of the 1986 BBC-TV series *Classic Ghost Stories* (1986), and it was turned into a short film in 2010.

IN THE YEAR 19– there were two members of the Troop of Scouts attached to a famous school, named respectively Arthur Wilcox and Stanley Judkins. They were the same age, boarded in the same house, were in the same division, and naturally were members of the same patrol. They were so much alike in appearance as to cause anxiety and trouble, and even irritation, to the masters who came in contact with them. But oh how different were they in their inward man, or boy!

It was to Arthur Wilcox that the Head Master said, looking up with a smile as the boy entered chambers, “Why, Wilcox, there will be a deficit in the prize fund if you stay here much longer! Here, take this handsomely bound copy of the *Life and Works of Bishop Ken*, and with it my hearty congratulations to yourself and your excellent parents.”

It was Wilcox again, whom the Provost noticed as he passed through the playing fields, and, pausing for a moment, observed to the Vice-Provost, “That lad has a remarkable brow!”

“Indeed, yes,” said the Vice-Provost. “It denotes either genius or water on the brain.”

As a Scout, Wilcox secured every badge and distinction for which he competed. The Cookery Badge, the Map-Making Badge, the Life-Saving Badge, the Badge for picking up bits of newspaper, the Badge for not slamming the door when leaving pupil-room, and many others.

Of the Life-Saving Badge I may have a word to say when we come to treat of Stanley Judkins.

You cannot be surprised to hear that Mr. Hope Jones added a special verse to each of his songs, in commendation of Arthur Wilcox, or that the Lower Master burst into tears when handing him the Good Conduct Medal in its handsome claret-colored case: the medal which had been unanimously voted to him by the whole of Third Form.

Unanimously, did I say? I am wrong. There was one dissentient, Judkins *mi.*, who said that he had excellent reasons for acting as he did. He shared, it seems, a room with his major.

You cannot, again, wonder that in after years Arthur Wilcox was the first, and so far the only boy, to become Captain of both the School and of the Oppidans, or that the strain of carrying out the duties of both positions, coupled with the ordinary work of the school, was so severe that a complete rest for six months, followed by a voyage round the world, was pronounced an absolute necessity by the family doctor.

It would be a pleasant task to trace the steps by which he attained the giddy eminence he now occupies; but for the moment enough of Arthur Wilcox. Time presses, and we must turn to a very different matter: the career of Stanley Judkins—Judkins *ma.*

Stanley Judkins, like Arthur Wilcox, attracted the attention of the authorities—but in quite another fashion. It was to him that the Lower Master said, with no cheerful smile, “What, again, Judkins? A very little persistence in this course of conduct, my boy, and you will have cause to regret that you ever entered this academy. There, take that, and that, and think yourself very lucky you don’t get that and that!”

It was Judkins, again, whom the Provost had cause to notice as he passed through the playing fields, when a cricket ball struck him with considerable force on the ankle, and a voice from a short way off cried, “Thank you, cut-over!”

“I think,” said the Provost, pausing for a moment to rub his ankle, “that that boy had better fetch his cricket ball for himself!”

“Indeed, yes,” said the Vice-Provost, “and if he comes within

reach, I will do my best to fetch him something else."

As a Scout, Stanley Judkins secured no badge save those which he was able to abstract from members of other patrols. In the cookery competition he was detected trying to introduce squibs into the Dutch oven of the next-door competitors. In the tailoring competition he succeeded in sewing two boys together very firmly, with disastrous effect when they tried to get up. For the Tidiness Badge he was disqualified, because, in the Midsummer school-time, which chanced to be hot, he could not be dissuaded from sitting with his fingers in the ink: as he said, for coolness' sake. For one piece of paper which he picked up, he must have dropped at least six banana skins or orange peels. Aged women seeing him approaching would beg him with tears in their eyes not to carry their pails of water across the road. They knew too well what the result would inevitably be.

But it was in the life-saving competition that Stanley Judkins' conduct was most blamable and had the most far-reaching effects. The practice, as you know, was to throw a selected lower boy, of suitable dimensions, fully dressed, with his hands and feet tied together, into the deepest part of Cuckoo Weir, and to time the Scout whose turn it was to rescue him.

On every occasion when he was entered for this competition, Stanley Judkins was seized, at the critical moment, with a severe fit of cramp, which caused him to roll on the ground and utter alarming cries. This naturally distracted the attention of those present from the boy in the water, and had it not been for the presence of Arthur Wilcox the death-roll would have been a heavy one.

As it was, the Lower Master found it necessary to take a firm line and say that the competition must be discontinued. It was in vain that Mr. Beasley Robinson represented to him that in five competitions only four lower boys had actually succumbed. The Lower Master said that he would be the last to interfere in any way with the work of the Scouts; but that three of these boys had

been valued members of his choir, and both he and Dr. Ley felt that the inconvenience caused by the losses outweighed the advantages of the competitions.

Besides, the correspondence with the parents of these boys had become annoying, and even distressing: they were no longer satisfied with the printed form which he was in the habit of sending out, and more than one of them had actually visited Eton and taken up much of his valuable time with complaints.

So the life-saving competition is now a thing of the past.

In short, Stanley Judkins was no credit to the Scouts, and, there was talk on more than one occasion of informing him that his services were no longer required. This course was strongly advocated by Mr. Lambart; but in the end milder counsels prevailed, and it was decided to give him another chance.

SO IT IS that we find him at the beginning of the Midsummer Holidays of 19— at the Scouts' camp in the beautiful district of W (or X) in the county of D (or Y).

It was a lovely morning, and Stanley Judkins and one or two of his friends—for he still had friends—lay basking on the top of the down. Stanley was lying on his stomach with his chin propped on his hands, staring into the distance.

"I wonder what that place is," he said.

"Which place?" said one of the others.

"That sort of clump in the middle of the field down there."

"Oh, ah! How should I know what it is?"

"What do you want to know for?" said another.

"I don't know: I like the look of it. What's it called? Nobody got a map?" said Stanley. "Call yourselves Scouts!"

"Here's a map all right," said Wilfred Pipsqueak, ever resourceful, "and there's the place marked on it. But it's inside the red ring. We can't go there."

"Who cares about a red ring?" said Stanley. "But it's got no

name on your silly map."

"Well, you can ask this old chap what it's called if you're so keen to find out."

"This old chap" was an old shepherd who had come up and was standing behind them.

"Good morning, young gents," he said, "you've got a fine day for your doin's, ain't you?"

"Yes, thank you," said Algernon de Montmorency, with native politeness. "Can you tell us what that clump over there's called? And what's that thing inside it?"

"Course I can tell you," said the shepherd. "That's Wailin' Well, that is. But you ain't got no call to worry about that."

"Is it a well in there?" said Algernon. "Who uses it?"

The shepherd laughed. "Bless you," he said, "there ain't from a man to a sheep in these parts uses Wailin' Well, nor haven't done all the years I've lived here."

"Well, there'll be a record broken today, then," said Stanley Judkins, "because I shall go and get some water out of it for tea!"

"Sakes alive, young gentleman!" said the shepherd in a startled voice, "don't you get to talkin' that way! Why, ain't your masters give you notice not to go by there? They'd ought to have done."

"Yes, they have," said Wilfred Pipsqueak.

"Shut up, you ass!" said Stanley Judkins. "What's the matter with it? Isn't the water good? Anyhow, if it was boiled, it would be all right."

"I don't know as there's anything much wrong with the water," said the shepherd. "All I know is, my old dog wouldn't go through that field, let alone me or anyone else that's got a morsel of brains in their heads."

"More fool them," said Stanley Judkins, at once rudely and ungrammatically. "Whoever took any harm going there?" he added.

"Three women and a man," said the shepherd gravely. "Now just you listen to me. I know these 'ere parts and you don't, and I

can tell you this much: for these ten years last past there ain't been a sheep fed in that field, nor a crop raised off of it—and it's good land, too. You can pretty well see from here what a state it's got into with brambles and suckers and trash of all kinds. *You've* got a glass, young gentleman," he said to Wilfred Pipsqueak, "you can tell with that anyway."

"Yes," said Wilfred, "but I see there's tracks in it. Someone must go through it sometimes."

"Tracks!" said the shepherd. "I believe you! Four tracks: three women and a man."

"What d'you mean, three women and a man?" said Stanley, turning over for the first time and looking at the shepherd (he had been talking with his back to him till this moment: he was an ill-mannered boy).

"Mean? Why, what I says: three women and a man."

"Who are they?" asked Algernon. "Why do they go there?"

"There's some p'r'aps could tell you who they *was,*" said the shepherd, "but it was afore my time they come by their end. And why they goes there still is more than the children of men can tell; except I've heard they was all bad 'uns when they was alive."

"By George, what a rum thing!" Algernon and Wilfred muttered; but Stanley was scornful and bitter.

"Why, you don't mean they're deaders? What rot! You must be a lot of fools to believe that. Who's ever seen them, I'd like to know?"

"*I've* seen 'em, young gentleman!" said the shepherd, "seen 'em from nearby on that bit of down; and my old dog, if he could speak, he'd tell you he've seen 'em, same time.

"About four o'clock of the day it was, much such a day as this. I see 'em, each one of 'em, come peerin' out of the bushes and stand up, and work their way slow by them tracks toward the trees in the middle where the well is."

"And what were they like? Do tell us!" said Algernon and Wilfred eagerly.

“Rags and bones, young gentlemen: all four of ’em; flutterin’ rags and whity bones. It seemed to me as if I could hear ’em clackin’ as they got along. Very slow they went, and lookin’ from side to side.”

“What were their faces like? Could you see?”

“They hadn’t much to call faces,” said the shepherd, “but I could seem to see as they had teeth.”

“Lor’!” said Wilfred, “and what did they do when they got to the trees?”

“I can’t tell you that, sir,” said the shepherd. “I wasn’t for stayin’ in that place, and if I had been, I was bound to look to my old dog; he’d gone! Such a thing he never done before as leave me. But gone he had, and when I came up with him in the end, he was in that state he didn’t know me, and was fit to fly at my throat. But I kep’ talkin’ to him, and after a bit he remembered my voice and came creepin’ up like a child askin’ pardon. I never want to see him like that again, nor yet no other dog.”

The dog, who had come up and was making friends all round, looked up at his master, and expressed agreement with what he was saying very fully.

The boys pondered for some moments on what they had heard; after which Wilfred said: “And why’s it called Wailing Well?”

“If you was round here at dusk of a winter’s evening, you wouldn’t want to ask why,” was all the shepherd said.

“Well, I don’t believe a word of it,” said Stanley Judkins, “and I’ll go there next chance I get; blowed if I don’t!”

“Then you won’t be ruled by me?” said the shepherd. “Nor yet by your masters as warned you off? Come now, young gentleman, you don’t want for sense, I should say. What should I want tellin’ you a pack of lies? It ain’t sixpence to me anyone goin’ in that field: but I wouldn’t like to see a young chap snuffed out like in his prime.”

“I expect it’s a lot more than sixpence to you,” said Stanley. “I expect you’ve got a whiskey still or something in there, and want

to keep other people away. Rot I call it. Come on back, you boys."

So they turned away. The two others said, "Good evening" and "Thank you" to the shepherd, but Stanley said nothing.

The shepherd shrugged his shoulders and stood where he was, looking after them rather sadly.

On the way back to the camp there was great argument about it all, and Stanley was told as plainly as he could be told all the sorts of fools he would be if he went to the Wailing Well.

That evening, among other notices, Mr. Beasley Robinson asked if all maps had got the red ring marked on them. "Be particular," he said, "not to trespass inside it."

Several voices—among them the sulky one of Stanley Judkins—said, "Why not, sir?"

"Because not," said Mr. Beasley Robinson, "and if that isn't enough for you, I can't help it." He turned and spoke to Mr. Lambart in a low voice, and then said, "I'll tell you this much: we've been asked to warn Scouts off that field. It's very good of the people to let us camp here at all, and the least we can do is to oblige them—I'm sure you'll agree to that."

Everybody said, "Yes, sir!" except Stanley Judkins, who was heard to mutter, "Oblige them be blowed!"

EARLY IN THE afternoon of the next day, the following dialogue was heard:

"Wilcox, is all your tent there?"

"No, sir, Judkins isn't!"

"That boy is *the* most infernal nuisance ever invented! Where do you suppose he is?"

"I haven't an idea, sir."

"Does anybody else know?"

"Sir, I shouldn't wonder if he'd gone to the Wailing Well."

"Who's that? Pipsqueak? What's the Wailing Well?"

"Sir, it's that place in the field by—well, sir, it's in a clump of

trees in a rough field."

"D'you mean inside the red ring? Good heavens! What makes you think he's gone there?"

"Why, he was terribly keen to know about it yesterday, and we were talking to a shepherd man, and he told us a lot about it and advised us not to go there. But Judkins didn't believe him, and said he meant to go."

"Young ass!" said Mr. Hope Jones, "did he take anything with him?"

"Yes, I think he took some rope and a can. We did tell him he'd be a fool to go."

"Little brute! What the deuce does he mean by pinching stores like that! Well, come along, you three, we must see after him. Why can't people keep the simplest orders? What was it the man told you? No, don't wait, let's have it as we go along."

And off they started—Algernon and Wilfred talking rapidly and the other two listening with growing concern. At last they reached that spur of down overlooking the field of which the shepherd had spoken the day before. It commanded the place completely; the well inside the dump of bent and gnarled Scotch firs was plainly visible, and so were the four tracks winding about among the thorns and rough growth.

It was a wonderful day of shimmering heat. The sea looked like a floor of metal. There was no breath of wind. They were all exhausted when they got to the top, and flung themselves down on the hot grass.

"Nothing to be seen of him yet," said Mr. Hope Jones, "but we must stop here a bit. You're done up—not to speak of me. Keep a sharp look-out," he went on after a moment, "I thought I saw the bushes stir."

"Yes," said Wilcox, "so did I. Look . . . no, that can't be him. It's somebody though, putting their head up, isn't it?"

"I thought it was, but I'm not sure."

Silence for a moment. Then: "That's him, sure enough," said

Wilcox, “getting over the hedge on the far side. Don’t you see? With a shiny thing. That’s the can you said he had.”

“Yes, it’s him, and he’s making straight for the trees,” said Wilfred.

At this moment Algernon, who had been staring with all his might, broke into a scream.

“What’s that on the track? On all fours—O, it’s the woman. O, don’t let me look at her! Don’t let it happen!” And he rolled over, clutching at the grass and trying to bury his head in it.

“Stop that!” said Mr. Hope Jones loudly—but it was no use. “Look here,” he said, “I must go down there. You stop here, Wilfred, and look after that boy. Wilcox, you run as hard as you can to the camp and get some help.”

They ran off, both of them. Wilfred was left alone with Algernon, and did his best to calm him, but indeed he was not much happier himself. From time to time he glanced down the hill and into the field. He saw Mr. Hope Jones drawing nearer at a swift pace, and then, to his great surprise, he saw him stop, look up and round about him, and turn quickly off at an angle! What could be the reason?

He looked at the field, and there he saw a terrible figure—something in ragged black—with whitish patches breaking out of it: the head, perched on a long thin neck, half hidden by a shapeless sort of blackened sun-bonnet. The creature was waving thin arms in the direction of the rescuer who was approaching, as if to ward him off: and between the two figures the air seemed to shake and shimmer as he had never seen it. And as he looked, he began himself to feel something of a waviness and confusion in his brain, which made him guess what might be the effect on someone within closer range of the influence.

He looked away hastily, to see Stanley Judkins making his way pretty quickly toward the clump, and in proper Scout fashion; evidently picking his steps with care to avoid treading on snapping sticks or being caught by arms of brambles. Evidently, though he

saw nothing, he suspected some sort of ambush, and was trying to go noiselessly.

Wilfred saw all that, and he saw more, too. With a sudden and dreadful sinking at the heart, he caught sight of someone among the trees, waiting; and again of someone—another of the hideous black figures—working slowly along the track from another side of the field, looking from side to side, as the shepherd had described it.

Worst of all, he saw a fourth—unmistakably a man this time—rising out of the bushes a few yards behind the wretched Stanley, and painfully, as it seemed, crawling into the track. On all sides the miserable victim was cut off.

Wilfred was at his wits' end. He rushed at Algernon and shook him. "Get up," he said. "Yell! Yell as loud as you can. Oh, if we'd got a whistle!"

Algernon pulled himself together. "There's one," he said, "Wilcox's; he must have dropped it."

So one whistled, the other screamed. In the still air the sound carried. Stanley heard; he stopped; he turned round; and then indeed a cry was heard more piercing and dreadful than any that the boys on the hill could raise.

It was too late.

The crouched figure behind Stanley sprang at him and caught him about the waist. The dreadful one that was standing waving her arms waved them again, but in exultation. The one that was lurking among the trees shuffled forward, and she too stretched out her arms as if to clutch at something coming her way; and the other, farthest off, quickened her pace and came on, nodding gleefully.

The boys took it all in in an instant of terrible silence, and hardly could they breathe as they watched the horrid struggle between the man and his victim. Stanley struck with his can, the only weapon he had. The rim of a broken black hat fell off the creature's head and showed a white skull with stains that might be

wisps of hair.

By this time one of the women had reached the pair, and was pulling at the rope that was coiled about Stanley's neck. Between them they overpowered him in a moment. The awful screaming ceased, and then the three passed within the circle of the clump of firs.

Yet for a moment it seemed as if rescue might come. Mr. Hope Jones, striding quickly along, suddenly stopped, turned, seemed to rub his eyes, and then started running *toward* the field. More: the boys glanced behind them, and saw not only a troop of figures from the camp coming over the top of the next down, but the shepherd running up the slope of their own hill. They beckoned, they shouted, they ran a few yards toward him and then back again. He mended his pace.

Once more the boys looked toward the field. There was nothing. Or, was there something among the trees? Why was there a mist about the trees? Mr. Hope Jones had scrambled over the hedge, and was plunging through the bushes.

The shepherd stood beside them, panting. They ran to him and clung to his arms. "They've got him! In the trees!" was as much as they could say, over and over again.

"What? Do you tell me he've gone in there after all I said to him yesterday? Poor young thing! Poor young thing!" He would have said more, but other voices broke in. The rescuers from the camp had arrived. A few hasty words, and all were dashing down the hill.

They had just entered the field when they met Mr. Hope Jones. Over his shoulder hung the corpse of Stanley Judkins. He had cut it from the branch to which he found it hanging, waving to and fro. There was not a drop of blood in the body.

ON THE FOLLOWING day Mr. Hope Jones sallied forth with an axe and with the expressed intention of cutting down every tree in the

clump, and of burning every bush in the field. He returned with a nasty cut in his leg and a broken axe-helve. Not a spark of fire could he light, and on no single tree could he make the least impression.

I have heard that the present population of the Wailing Well field consists of three women, a man, and a boy.

The shock experienced by Algernon de Montmorency and Wilfred Pipsqueak was severe. Both of them left the camp at once. And the occurrence undoubtedly cast a gloom—if but a passing one—on those who remained. One of the first to recover his spirits was Judkins *mi.*

Such, gentlemen, is the story of the career of Stanley Judkins, and of a portion of the career of Arthur Wilcox. It has, I believe, never been told before. If it has a moral, that moral is, I trust, obvious. If it has none, I do not well know how to help it.

THE OFFERING

MICHAEL MARSHALL SMITH

Michael Marshall Smith is a novelist and screenwriter. Under this name he has published ninety short stories and five novels—*Only Forward*, *Spares*, *One of Us*, *The Servants*, and *Hannah Green and her Unfeasibly Mundane Existence*—winning the Philip K. Dick, International Horror Guild, and August Derleth awards, along with the Prix Bob Morane in France. He has also won the British Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction four times, more than any other author.

Writing as "Michael Marshall," he has published seven thrillers, including The Straw Men series, *The Intruders*—adapted by BBC America into a TV series starring John Simm and Mira Sorvino—and *Killer Move*. His most recent novel under this name is *We Are Here*.

Now additionally writing as "Michael Rutger," he has published the adventure thriller *The Anomaly* and a sequel, *The Possession*, while an extensive retrospective collection, *The Best of Michael Marshall Smith*, appeared from Subterranean Press at the end of 2020.

Currently cowriting and executive producing the development of *The Straw Men* for television, he is also creative consultant to The Blank Corporation, Neil

Gaiman's production company in Los Angeles.

"When I first started thinking about a tale involving folklore, I decided to set it in Solvang," explains the author, "a rather odd Danish-themed town a couple of hundred miles south of where I live in California—despite the fact that I knew nothing about the folktales of the country.

"I started a story, about a family, but couldn't work out where it was going. I put it to one side. Then, quite by chance, we went to Denmark over the summer—and within hours of being there I knew what the story was after all, as if I had to be closer to the source for the story to come alive. The story, or something else . . ."

ALWAYS THE SAME. So yes, I guess it is a ritual. Or it's become one. We land. We take a cab. We buy what we need at the store on the corner. We make what we think we need to make.

Then we wait.

"SO, I HOPE it is all clear? You are happy?"

I smiled brightly at the petite Danish lady standing neatly in front of us. "It is, thank you. And we are."

I said it quickly, because I've known my wife more than long enough to be able to tell when she's unhappy by posture alone. Heck, I can tell when Lauren's not-happy with my eyes closed. We don't even have to be in the same room.

"Lovely," the woman said. Then looked momentarily wary. "Oh, I forget one thing. The shower? Please don't use it."

"Excuse me?"

This was Lauren, and you could have cut a cube of her tone and dropped it in a glass of scotch to bring it down to exactly the right temperature. A little below, actually.

“Just for tonight,” the woman added hurriedly. “There was a leak in there? It was fixed this morning. It needed . . .” She mimed someone doing something—caulking, I assumed. Or spaying a cat. “I don’t know this word? It will be perfect now. But it needs to dry. I’m sorry. Tomorrow morning, it will be great.”

“No problem,” I said, though it kind of was. After a long day of travel, I wanted a shower. Lauren has a tendency to cruise straight through into the evening—especially when we’re all still a little vague as to what time zone we’re in—and so was less likely to actually care, but I had a sense this might be the One More Thing that could push her over the edge. “And thanks for waiting to let us into the apartment,” I added, firmly. This was tactical, to remind my wife that our three-hour flight delay at Charles de Gaulle Airport had put the woman to some inconvenience.

“It was no trouble. And now I say to you, enjoy!”

She waved at us—which seemed odd, as we were barely two yards from her—and backed into the narrow hallway outside the apartment. I smiled and nodded and gently closed the door as she pattered away down the staircase.

There was silence for a long moment, broken only by the sound of rain on the windows.

“For fuck’s sake,” Lauren said.

“How come it’s okay when *you* say that?”

This was Jon, our son. Fourteen, but already an inch taller than me and increasingly the go-to in the family when it came to manhandling excessively large and heavy suitcases up and down stairs, not that I’m saying that Lauren habitually overpacks.

I made a face to suggest now wasn’t the time, and looked around the kitchen. “It’s . . . nice,” I said. “Characterful.”

Lauren shook her head curtly. “No it isn’t.”

“Oh it is,” I persisted. “It’s ‘funky.’ Right?”

And it was. Or at least, I wasn’t sure how else to describe it. The Airbnb was on the third and top floor of what seemed like it might previously have been a small warehouse, flanked by others

on a narrow and nondescript street in Christianshavn, a canal-crossed and bounded district of Copenhagen, alleged to be only about ten minutes from the central and more tourist-centered part. Christianshavn, too, was supposed to be "funky," and it was on this basis that Lauren had booked the location, though the closing minutes of the Uber from the airport had more strongly evoked a minor industrial town in Illinois, or Soviet Russia. Of course the wind and rain and dark, low skies weren't helping—nor the fact that, when we'd left our previous Airbnb that morning, Paris had been sunny and charming and generally Parisian in that way only Paris can really pull off.

The Airbnb itself was extremely . . . *compact*.

A single room on this level, divided into a trendily designed but small kitchen area, was dominated by a large steel fridge up against a concrete pillar that demarked the further space, which held a table and chairs but had no room for a couch. A walled cube had been carved out of this level to hold the bathroom, which was strange, but there wouldn't have been room for it anywhere else.

A steep and narrow set of stairs led up to where Lauren and I were supposed to sleep, an area that was probably the living area when the owners were home (this was increasingly clearly their primary and probably only residence, and we'd been requested to say—should anybody in the building ask—that we were "looking after the place" for them). A mattress bed had been placed on a raised platform there, somewhat artfully. A metal stepladder led up to a tiny sleeping loft into which Jon was going to have to cram himself.

It was fine. Really. Well, mainly.

Many plants. White walls, cozy slate and wood in the kitchen. Lots of books wedged into shelves and on windowsills. A few black-and-white photos showing a good-looking couple in their early thirties (Anders and Maja, the welcome note said)—the female half of which had just shown us around the place. The

bathroom, though tiny and currently subfunctional, had a serious design thing going on, including a modishly tarnished mirror. Tons of character overall, the kind of place you'd remember with great fondness if you'd rented it for a year with your crazy-but-gifted girlfriend right after you left college. And were Danish.

For two middle-aged Americans and their hulking teenage son? Far less ideal—even if it hadn't been following hard on a spacious and generally fabulous predecessor on the stylish and discrete Place de Valois (two turns off the Rue Saint-Honoré, and barely four minutes' walk from the Louvre).

All of this was clear to the naked eye, and not easy to spin otherwise. I glanced at Lauren, however, and saw she wasn't actually pissed anymore. Just starkly disappointed. And vulnerable. I'd been busy at work before the trip, and so she'd researched and made every single one of the bookings—planes, trains, cars, and lodging. She felt responsible.

"I like it," I said. "And you know what I always say. You have to wake up in a place to really get the measure of it."

"You do always say that," Jon agreed. "And it's always dumb."

I smiled, covertly, because I understood that he was, in a rare moment of teenage empathy, picking up on Lauren's unhappiness and trying to lighten the mood. The social tools of the young are seldom subtle, but they sometimes work nonetheless.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go explore."

SEVERAL HOURS LATER we returned to the apartment in significantly better spirits. I kept up a kind of manic, court jester–style cheerfulness as we battled over the windswept bridge to the center of town, which looked like it might be interesting were it not spitting with rain and getting dark. Jon slipped into a double act with me, peppering with undermining comments that finally got Lauren reluctantly smiling as we slogged our way back and started exploring some of the side streets of Christianshavn, lined with

narrow stone houses and more ex-warehouses.

Wikipedia had in the meantime informed me that the ground we were walking on was, in a sense, artificial—commanded to be built upon thousands of wooden piles driven into the bay by King Christian IV (hence the district's name) in the early 1660s. The inclusion of water channels had protected it from devastating citywide fires more than once, saving a bunch of genuine seventeenth-century buildings and making it one of the oldest surviving sections of the city.

Once you'd gotten your eye into the architecture, and its presumably traditional lack of garish signage, it became evident there were bars and restaurants dotted along the streets, up little flights of stairs, or down in basements, not going out of their way to advertise their business to passersby. Eventually we cautiously made our way down into one of them, ready to back out immediately if we were committing some kind of cultural faux pas. It was warm and cozy, and we were greeted with immaculate English and affable locals and good beer, and I ate a beef dish with salty, little boiled potatoes and sour cream and capers and a ton of dill that was honestly one of the best things I can ever remember eating. Lauren and Jon dined successfully too, and when we walked burping back up the stairs, though it was still windy and now fully dark, we found the rain had finally stopped.

Back at the Airbnb, Jon went upstairs to lurk in his attic to watch YouTubers blather on about trivia and interact on Instagram and Snapchat with his homies back in California—all the things young people enthusiastically do in order to fail to be where they are, now.

Yeah, I know I'm old.

I was standing at the kitchen counter, trying to figure out the coffee machine in order to combat the extra beer or two I'd allowed myself out of relief that the evening had turned out okay after all, when I heard Lauren say something.

"Seriously?"

I turned to find her in front of the open fridge. The shelves were dotted with various fridge-style things, jars and pots of unfamiliar foodstuffs with unfathomable names—and the door was lined with organic-looking cartons and bottles of liquids. Only the middle shelf was empty apart from one thing.

"She did warn us they'd left their stuff," I said, still firmly in it's-all-great mode. "And said to help ourselves, and just replace anything we use."

"I know. I heard her. And that's kind of fine, but this? Really?"

I came closer and saw that "this" was a bowl containing a mealy pale-gray sludge. There was a beige skin over the surface, caused by a day's hardening in the cold interior. And what looked like a pat of butter, resting on the top. "What even is that?"

Lauren leaned forward, peered at it. "Porridge, I think. They left a bowl of porridge, Bill. In the fridge. Porridge. Why would they do that?"

"I'm sure they just forgot."

"I'm going to throw it away."

"I wouldn't."

"Why on earth not? We're here for three days. No one's going to want four-day-old porridge."

"They might be planning on sneaking in here tonight, in the dead of night, and eating it all up."

Lauren sniggered. "What?"

"Well, come on. This is obviously their actual home. They Airbnb it once in a while to make working capital. I'm betting they're couchsurfing at a friend's while we're here. Or standing in the garden shivering. Come on—let's look."

Eyebrow raised, Lauren followed me to the back of the room. Whereas the front gave an uninspiring view of the narrow street, the rear showed something that our hunched wanderings earlier had suggested was a feature of the area.

The backs of a higgledy-piggledy collection of tall and pretty-old houses—some timber-framed—and small warehouses. In

between was a small, enclosed patchwork of open spaces, with a few little trees and a bench and a sagging picnic table: the whole area was rather damp, and overshadowed, but possibly nice in the summer. A communal garden, basically, which (according to our host's instruction leaflet) we were welcome to use. Currently deserted, of course.

"Maybe they're hiding in the bushes. Let's go down and surprise them. We could be helpful, take the porridge. They must have left it for someone."

"You're an idiot," Lauren said, yawning massively. She walked past the fridge and shut it without further action.

I WOKE AT 3:00 a.m.

It wasn't the first time. When Jon was little I used to blame him for my vacation jet lag, as he'd refuse to even try to go to bed until late, and then flamboyantly oversleep, and repeat this pattern for days, force-mapping the rest of the family onto his messed-up schedule. But now he either adapted more quickly or else suffered in silence like a grown-up. Five nights into the trip, I was still suffering. He was, meanwhile, snoring above.

Though I'd crashed out at ten, I woke soon after midnight, then again at 1:30 a.m. Both times I managed to drift back to sleep fairly quickly. Not going to happen this time, I could tell. Especially not while sharing a bed (or, more accurately, lying on a mattress) that was a good deal narrower than the California king we had at home. Lauren has a tendency to hog the bed. She naturally says the same of me. It's probably just that whoever's asleep gets the lion's share of the real estate.

I lay there stoically for a while, then sat up.

The air was cold. I could hear light rain against the windows, but not see it, as Lauren had lashed a pair of towels over them before we turned in: none of the windows in the apartment had curtains. Presumably the owners liked being woken by the light,

marrying their schedules to the natural seasons and local environment, or some such hipster claptrap.

I knew I was committed now, and carefully slid out my side of the bed. Doing so silently, and getting around the concrete pillar in the middle of the small room without in the process tumbling down the opening to the stairs, was not a trivial undertaking—and by the time I'd managed it I was wishing I'd never started. But the one thing that will usually get me back to sleep is a cup of tea, made English-style with milk, sipped slowly while I try to think sleepy thoughts. And so I persisted.

One of the eccentricities of the apartment was that (unlike most such places in Europe) it had no electric kettle. After padding downstairs I put a pan of water on the stove, and prepared to wait, just like the early settlers.

It took a while to heat, and I wandered into the other part of the room, until I wound up in front of the windows Lauren and I had looked through before coming to bed.

The interstitial garden space looked even gloomier in the dead of night. A few dots of illumination within the surrounding buildings, a light or two in stairwells, one in the apartment of one of those people who are up in the night, for whatever inexplicable reason. All you could see was a variegated gloom, confusingly and intermittently high-lit by glints from the edges of wet leaves on branches flicked around in the wind, slicked down by rain. The weather app on my phone suggested it'd be better tomorrow. I hoped so. I wasn't sure I had enough manic cheerfulness to get us through a whole day.

I was reflecting vaguely on how informal spaces are a telling indicator of the people who live near them, reflecting their values and cultures in concrete form—I'd noticed earlier that there was not a single instance of graffiti down there, just as people in Copenhagen appeared unthinkingly confident that they could leave their plentiful bicycles propped up against walls and lampposts, unlocked, without fear of them being stolen—and

starting to feel sleepy, when I found myself moving closer to the window, peering into the darkness.

I wasn't sure what I'd seen, at first. If I'd even seen anything at all, or how I could have. It was very dark. Only those glints off the leaves gave the space any definition.

I squinted against the rain, the window glass exuding enough coldness to chill my face. Then I saw movement.

Only of some low branches, a few feet off the ground.

But this revealed a figure.

It was small. Unless my sense of scale was off—and it could have been, because I was looking downward at an angle, through a window that was misting from the body-temperature air coming out of my nostrils and mouth—the person down in the garden could only be about three feet high, maybe three and a half, tops. A child's height, though from the momentary glimpse it didn't seem like one to me. The build was wrong. Neither spindly, as kids that size can be, or fat. More kind of . . . portly. The subliminally quick look at it didn't give me enough time to try to make out the face, though I came away with an impression of a thick nose, heavy brows, and . . .

Suddenly I realized I could hear a bubbling sound. Then a loud, hissing noise. From behind.

The pan of water on the stove was boiling over.

By the time I'd run over to take it off the heat, and hurried back, whatever shape I thought I'd seen in the bushes below had gone. Most likely it had never been more than an illusion created out of rain and shadows. No one in their right mind would be down there in that weather, in the middle of the night, just standing there.

I made the tea. Took it upstairs and drank it slowly in bed, listening to the breathing of my wife, and the faint continuing snore of my son up in the sleeping loft.

And before long, I was asleep myself.

I WOKE TO an empty bed. Bright sunlight and slivers of blue were visible in the gaps around the towels up at the windows. From below came a tuneless humming that I knew could indicate only one thing—Lauren was in reasonable spirits.

I pulled on sweats and navigated down the narrow steps. My wife was in one of the chairs, studying a guidebook. She pointed her coffee cup to indicate there was more in the kitchen. I could hear the sound of falling water.

"Jon's in there," she said. "And I'm forced to admit, the shower kind of rocks. There's barely room to get dressed afterward but in terms of providing warm water from an elevated source, it delivers convincingly."

"Excellent." I poured coffee and went to the fridge for milk. As I removed the carton, I noticed something missing. "You didn't eat it, surely?"

"What? Oh, the porridge. Obviously not. It's in the trash—which, incidentally, they'd left half full. Seriously, Bill—I know you're all about respecting people's spaces blah-blah, but leaving that gunk in the fridge is not okay. We're paying over three hundred bucks a night for this hovel."

"Fine." I headed toward the bathroom, hand raised to knock.

"Bad idea," Lauren advised. "He's kind of grumpy this morning."

"On a scale of one to ten?"

"We're gonna need some bigger numbers."

"Oh. Guess I'll leave him be."

"I really would."

I picked up the trash from where Lauren had left it near the door, and took the bag downstairs.

THE STAIRCASE EMERGED onto a kind of covered cobbled passage at ground level, which suggested horses had once been led through it. This gave out onto the communal garden, where—the Airbnb

instructions indicated—trash receptacles were to be found. This proved to be true: they were all neatly corralled together in a little roofed structure in the center.

After I emerged, I looked around for a few minutes. It was hard to imagine that this area had once been sea, part of the bay. But I guess it had been this way for over four centuries, far longer than all but a couple of the cities in the USA—older by a couple of years, for example, than the earliest scraps of New York. Where once had been water was now land. Where I stood had once been a little farmholding, perhaps, long ago. A place where people lived and died and grew things according to the old ways, etc. The earth is what you make it, in the end, and this place felt real and old.

Then I remembered what I thought I'd seen in the middle of the night. The memory felt very insubstantial, as they generally do in daylight. I'd been tired, and thought it certain it'd merely been a trick of low light. Nonetheless, on the way back to the passageway I paused, squinting up against the sky, judging an approximate position in relation to the window of our Airbnb, three floors above.

Then turned.

Some branches and a bush were to one side of a low portion of fencing, semi-marking this little courtyard off from similar portions presumably associated with the other buildings. At ground level, a little flower bed.

Even my untrained eye could tell it was there for the cultivation of culinary herbs. As I walked closer and bent forward, I could smell mint and a hint of dill, the latter especially strongly. The Danes appeared to go nuts for the stuff. And there—

I stopped, squatted down.

A couple of dill plants had been bent near the bottom of their stems, and in the wet soil by their bases was something that looked a lot like boot prints. About six inches long. Couldn't be actual boots, because there was no impression of sole marks, which all shoes or boots had, didn't they? And they were too

small.

"Who are you?"

I straightened up fast, to see an old woman ten feet away, near the back entrance to one of the other houses. Her skin was gray and her face looked like an apple that had been left on a shelf for a very long time.

"Excuse me?"

"Is not a hard question. Who *are you*?"

"My name's Bill. We're . . . looking after an apartment for a few days," I said. "For Anders and Maja?"

She looked back at me coolly. She didn't believe me, that was clear. "You are English?"

"American."

"Even worse. You people don't know how to 'look after' anything at all," she said, and turned and went back indoors.

WHEN I GOT upstairs it was clear Lauren hadn't been kidding about our son's mood.

In general Jon's pretty easy to live with. Sure, he thinks both his parents are dumbasses a lot of the time (and is not shy about hiding it), and he forgets to pick up his plate or towels or used Starbucks cups, like, *ever*—but he does his own laundry and he's smart and good company much of the time, and genuinely funny. But every now and then, wholly unpredictably . . . well, he's a teenager. Like cats, they are free spirits, unsusceptible to human control.

As I got up to the door of the apartment, I could hear him being very teenage indeed—and also heard Lauren coming right back at him, as she sometimes will. About six months ago, in a heated and unguarded moment in the midst of family strife, I observed that sometimes it was like having two teens in the

family. I won't say that again. Ever.

By the time I'd done what I could to diffuse or derail the argument (Lauren had, despite her own warning, eventually knocked on the door to the bathroom asking when Jon would be out, been informed he'd be out when he was ready, had inquired as to how long that might be, been told it would be when he was goddamned ready, and it had escalated from there) and showered and got dressed and encouraged two sullen people out the door, the old lady in the garden had slipped my mind.

It only took a few minutes for Lauren to cheer up. All she really needed was a chance to privately express the opinion that our son was occasionally an asshole, and for me to agree. She has done the same for me when arguments fall the other way.

Jon also seemed to level out after a blood sugar adjustment, and was tolerant about touring the Museum of Design, though even I got to the point of thinking, *Oh, yet another stylish chair, cool, cool.* But then we had lunch at Nyhavn, a touristy stretch of seventeenth-century buildings and restaurants on a canal, and somewhere during the process, we lost him.

His phone had started pinging, and—though we've made it clear a million times that phone use during meals is Not Okay—he disappeared into it. I asked him to stop. He said it was important. I asked which of his friends were involved, trying to open up a conversation, and was told it was none of my business. My response was a little terse.

During this exchange, Lauren reached out and touched my arm, which further annoyed me. It sometimes seems that her getting into it with Jon is merely judiciously firm parenting, whereas when I do the same thing it's me being oppressive, or uncool, or basically an asshole.

I fairly gently shrugged her hand off, but my irritation was obvious and so suddenly I was at loggerheads with her too.

Jon stood up and said he was going for a walk.

"Where?" I asked.

"Just, around. Does it matter?"

"We'd like you to be with us."

"So I can listen to you bicker? No thanks."

And with that, he strode off—having unlocked that most infuriating of teenage achievements: blaming parents for being in an argument that you've caused yourself.

Lauren shrugged and told me to let him go. We settled our disagreement, basically by me letting that go too, and paid.

WE SPENT THE next couple of hours wandering the streets around Nyhavn, along the river and up and down further canals. I couldn't help missing Jon. He'd gone off by himself for a while a couple times in Paris—albeit in more cheerful moods—so this wasn't an unknown state of affairs. But it was still pretty new. Last time we came to Europe, only two years before, it wouldn't have happened. He'd still been at the stage where not only did we feel the need to keep an eye on him at all times, but he wouldn't have wanted to be without our company. We were his world. Kids simply don't get how hard it is for parents to keep up, to move with the times, to engage with the person who exists now, rather than unconsciously behaving as if they're still that child of three, five, seven years ago. Nor will they understand, until they have kids of their own, that to a parent, that little boy will always be there, like the seabed under old streets.

Nonetheless, it was nice for Lauren and I to have some time together, and we spent a while in a Christmas-themed store choosing a tree decoration, something we've done on our travels for many years. I was drawn to a little wooden tableau of three muted-colored, half-timber houses, with the word copenhagen on it (not least, as experience has shown that as the years pass it's not always easy to remember where every single decoration was acquired), but Lauren became set on a small, gnomelike figure with a beard and bright costume. It was a little kitsch for my taste,

with a bright-red tunic and cheeks and nose, and the carved wood of the face made the brow and nose seem rather brutal, even unfriendly, but as Lauren is the parent in charge of Christmas decorations—and she seemed very drawn to it—I was happy to go with her preference.

"Aha," the woman at the register said. "The Nisse. Very Danish, very old. Means 'the little relative.' The guardian of the land and the home. A good choice for Christmas, I think!"

I left Lauren chatting with her and wandered back outside onto the canal to watch the world going past. It was bright and sunny, and for a few minutes I felt truly as if I was on vacation.

Half an hour later, when we started needing coffee, I took a look at Find My Friends on my phone and saw Jon had found his way to the main shopping area, ten minutes' walk away.

"I'm going to text him," I said.

Lauren nodded, looking a little relieved.

I sent a suggestion that we meet up at the Espresso House (evidently Denmark's version of Starbucks) in the center. I received a brief acquiescence, and Lauren and I set off in that direction.

We met up, and things were okay. Nobody apologized, as such, but we reengaged, hung out, saw a few old buildings and statues and other things.

Later we stopped off for dinner at a fun place overlooking the river, and we had nice food and a good time, and there was laughter.

I'm glad about that.

I WAS UP early the next morning, a sign I'd finally aligned with the local clock, as I'm generally awake a good hour before the rest of the family.

I made coffee, considered taking a cup to Lauren but decided to let her lie in—it seemed like she'd had a more troubled night

than me, and I'd woken briefly at one point to hear her moaning gently in her sleep—and to grab the prized first slot in a shared bathroom, before the floor got damp and the air humid and the mirror fogged with condensation.

It's an indication of my immense self-control that I didn't as a result wake both my own family and everyone on the entire block. Instead of yelping when it turned out the shower was freezing cold, I merely flinched so massively that it nearly put my back into spasm.

Muttering darkly, feeling as if I'd been slapped in the face by the universe, I stepped back out and fiddled with the controls, assuming one of the others had messed with them, but to no avail. There was no hot water. For god's sake.

I boiled a saucepan, brought it to the bathroom, and mixed it with cold to effect a sink bath and shave. Then, still shivering from the shock of the water (it hadn't been merely "not warm," but felt like it'd dripped straight off a glacier), I considered what to do next.

Both Lauren and Jon would want showers. Should I call the Airbnb owners? It was only a little after eight, and thus on the early side to bother people (though in my head I could hear Lauren arguing, "Screw them, their shower doesn't work"). It was also unlikely that they'd be able to have a plumber here within the hour, so it wasn't going to solve the initial problem. But should I call them anyway?

I decided to think about it, with a cigarette.

I don't smoke much anymore. I scaled down heavily once Jon got old enough to start to hate the fact that I did, and confident and independent enough to express this feeling. But once in a while, yes. I had a pack purchased from a tabac in a Paris backstreet. I had coffee, too.

No one else was awake, and I'd just been doused in freezing water. I was owed, right? Hell yes.

That is how the logic of nicotine addiction works.

I quietly unlocked the door to the apartment, and headed downstairs to the communal garden.

I WAS SITTING at the bench with some coffee left, and was considering whether to go for broke and have a second cigarette—though it was overcast, and a little cold—when I heard a clanking sound. It was coming from a narrow stairway that led to below ground level on the left side of the building.

A short, bald, and thickset man of about sixty emerged, holding a wrench. I put two and two together. “Excuse me?”

He stopped walking, very suddenly. “Yes?”

“Are you . . .” I hesitated, trying to work out how to phrase it simply, though every Dane I’d encountered so far seemed to be able to speak perfectly good English. “The hot water. Upstairs. It’s not hot.”

“I know.” He held up the wrench, as if to underline his awareness of the situation. “I’m working.”

“Do you know when it will be fixed?”

He shrugged. “Today, I hope. It needs replacement. Aha.”

This last was to another and much taller man, who’d just entered the garden via the cobbled passage. He was carrying a large metal cylinder, which, though it did not look new, certainly seemed like the kind of thing that would be usefully involved in furnace-related repairs.

The first man said something to the second, in Danish. The taller man smiled, held the rusty cylinder in my direction. “We fix.”

“Great,” I said, nodding very cheerfully.

They went to the staircase and disappeared back underground. I shelved plans for a second cigarette, realizing that I’d better head upstairs and break the news.

As I stood, I saw a face at a window on the second floor of the building. After a second I recognized it as the old woman from the

previous morning. She opened the window.

"What did you do?"

"Excuse me?"

She thrust her gnarled finger angrily at me. "You did this. What did you do?"

"Did what?"

"The house is broken. What did you do? Or what *didn't* you do?"

"I'm sorry—I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Fix it. Or he will fix *you*."

And with that, she slammed her window shut.

THE TEAM WAS predictably unhappy about the lack of hot water, and seemingly also willing to blame me for the problem—but that's how families roll. They won't necessarily kill the messenger, but they'll most certainly give him a hard time.

They made do, and forty minutes later I waited in the hall for them to leave so I could lock the door. Jon came out second, and stopped as he passed me. His face set.

"Asshole," he said, and stomped down the stairs.

I was so taken aback that all I could do was stare after him. He hadn't been joking. That was clear.

I locked the door and followed. By the time I got to the bottom and out onto the street, Lauren was looking glum. Not just because of now heavily overcast skies, or the drizzle.

"Where is he?"

She indicated with her head. I saw Jon's back, already up at the next corner and moving fast. "What the heck?"

"He smelled smoke on you."

"Oh. *Shit*."

"If you're going to do it, you at least need to eat a mint or

something afterward."

"I'm forty-five years old, Lauren. I'm a grown-up. It's my life."

She looked at me. "Not just yours, though, is it?"

"What does that mean?"

"You're his dad."

I looked back toward where Jon had gone. At first I thought he'd disappeared, but then I spotted him by his hoodie, now nearly three blocks away and crossing the street by the bridge. I'd have to run pretty fast to catch up.

"Let him calm down," Lauren said.

I took a step in that direction, thinking maybe I should just do it. Catch up with him, try to talk. I didn't.

HE DIDN'T RESPOND to a couple of texts, including one inviting him to meet for lunch. I knew he'd be able to eat if he wanted to, as everywhere seemed to accept contactless payment and his phone was set up for it. So I let him be.

Lauren and I walked. And we looked at more things. It was okay. The weather slowly got worse, however, and though the streets we toured were attractive, it was starting to feel rather like just more of the same. I kept track of Jon's whereabouts meanwhile. He seemed, like us, to be wandering aimlessly around —though on different tracks.

Eventually the drizzle became heavy enough that it seemed pointless to keep battling against it, and we ducked into the nearest Espresso House.

We sat at a corner table, not saying much, Lauren flicking through Facebook on her phone, me watching the street through a window frosted with condensation.

After a while I zoned out. It was late midafternoon, the time when residual jet lag will come and wrap you in its fuzzy embrace. I came to suddenly at the sight of something outside.

A very short, burly figure in a rustic coat, stomping past, as if furious. Something about it made me feel uneasy, and I reached forward to wipe a little of the moisture off the window. The guy had gone.

But I saw someone else, and stood quickly. Lauren looked up. "Where are you going?"

"Jon's out there. I'll go get him."

It was now raining properly. Jon seemed directionless, adrift on the corner as if unsure where to go. I walked up to him, put my hand gently on his shoulder.

He jumped. "Christ, it's you."

"Yeah," I said. "Look, come into the coffee house. I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have smoked."

"Whatever. You want to kill yourself, be my guest."

"You don't mean that. I hope."

"No, of course I fucking don't."

"Jon, please don't use that kind of lang—"

"Fuck you, Dad. Me using bad words is the problem here? Asshole. You *promised* you'd stop."

"I know. I know. Look, Jon—it's raining. Come inside."

He resisted for a moment, then strode past me and into the Espresso House. I waited a beat, taking a deep breath, knowing there was work to do here, that it would require a lot of patience, and that I was not actually in the right.

As I turned to follow him, I thought I saw something across the intersection, behind the sheets of rain. A little above a child's height, but stocky, with a beard. But it was only the shadow of someone's coat, hurrying down the gray street.

JON BOUGHT HIMSELF a coffee and joined the table. That's another weird thing about them getting older. Sure, the money was coming out of my account, so I was paying, technically. But there wasn't a little kid standing beside me anymore, asking for what he

wanted and being pleased that his dad had brought it into being for him. Maybe even saying thanks. Apart from my financial role, the transaction was now his. I was now just some other guy standing in the coffee shop.

I caught myself having these thoughts and told myself: *woah, lighten up*.

He joined our table. There was some conversation, mainly between him and Lauren. I stayed out of it for the most part, wanting to avoid simply reigniting the same argument. She asked where he'd been and what he'd seen, and received monosyllabic answers. Then his phone buzzed and he fell straight into some protracted interaction on that—plugging his earphones in for good measure.

I sent a silent but sincere beat of hatred toward the creators of social media, especially those who had designed it to addict teenagers, and looked out of the window at the rain.

WE WAITED UNTIL it had slackened off a little, then set off for home—in the hope that the hot water had been fixed so Lauren and Jon could have showers before our last evening meal in Copenhagen.

Jon walked a few yards ahead, earphones still in place. After a couple of attempts to engage him in light conversation—both met with a heavy sigh, yanking one (but not both) of his earphones out, a bored and monosyllabic reply, and immediate replacement of the earphone—I kind of lost it.

"Jon," I said. "For god's sake. I'm trying to chat with you here."

"I'm listening to music."

"You can do that anywhere. And it's unbelievably antisocial. This is supposed to be family time. We're on vacation. Together."

"I don't even want to be here."

"Bill," Lauren said, quietly—but two days of trying to keep things nice had crept up on me to the point where I wasn't

listening.

"Seriously, Lauren. This is *not okay*."

"I know, but—"

"You know what's really not okay?" Jon said to me. "You *smoking*."

"Christ's sake. I know, and I'm sorry."

"So stop."

"I'm *trying*."

"No, you fucking aren't. If you were *trying* then you wouldn't buy any more."

"It's not as simple as—"

"Yeah, it really fucking is."

"Jon, will you *stop* swearing at me. It is *not* okay."

He looked at me. There was something in his eyes I'd never seen before. Someone who wasn't a kid anymore, but almost a grown man. Both lived inside his head, I knew that, but right now I was only seeing the man, and he was furious. "Fuck you."

And with that he started to walk off.

"Jon," I said, still angry but suddenly stricken too. "Just wait, okay? We'll go back together."

"I don't want to be with you."

Anger took the upper hand in my soul again, in an instant, like some horrific emotional tag team. I stormed after him. "Oh yes? And *then* what, genius? You're just going to stand outside the place and wait for us in the rain?"

"I've got the other key, dumbass."

He made a face, smeared with something else I'd never seen before. An expression of insolent pity. He yanked the keys out of his pocket and jangled them in my face. "See?" he said. "I don't need you anymore."

Then he plugged his earphones back in again and strode off into the wind.

"Fuck you then," I said, quietly. "Fuck. You."

I took a few deep breaths, then turned to see Lauren standing

in the rain twenty feet behind, looking small and sad and alone. "I'm sorry," I said, when I got to her.

She shrugged. "It's not your fault."

I wasn't so sure. "Let's give him some time."

She gestured eloquently at the climactic conditions.

I pointed across the street at a bar.

WE GAVE HIM an hour. A couple of beers and some talk about the next chunk of the vacation—four days in London—brought us both back to a point where we knew we'd be able to deal with Jon more positively. Then we walked back to the Airbnb.

I let us into the apartment. The second set of keys was lying on the kitchen counter. The bathroom was empty, however, and showed no sign of having been used.

I looked at Lauren. She mouthed the words *good luck*.

I went up the narrow stairs to the upper level, and stood at the bottom of the steps leading up to the sleeping loft.

"Jon, I'm sorry," I said.

There was no reply. I wasn't surprised.

"You're right about the smoking," I went on. "And I'll try harder. And I know that, in a lot of ways, you maybe don't need me anymore. Or you feel that way, at least. Me *or* mom. I get that. But I hope you still want us. Because we want you. We love you."

Still no reply.

I put one foot tentatively on the foot of the ladder. He didn't tell me to go away. So I climbed up.

He wasn't there.

THIS IS OUR seventh return trip.

I can hold something of a conversation in Danish now. It's useful for talking to older people. They're the ones who know the old stories, and they're the ones who believe me.

Like the woman in the community garden. It was her that we first encountered when we ran out of the house into the rain that night, desperately searching for our son. This time she was neither angry nor rude toward me.

Instead, when she learned why I looked so scared, and why Lauren was crying, she looked sad. "Sometimes the guardian's punishment is too hard," she said. "And maybe it's not even your fault. They should have explained to you."

She wouldn't elaborate, not that night at least. She went back indoors and would add nothing further. To me, or to the police, who I know did their best. They looked for Jon for months. The case is still open.

The old woman's dead now. Another neighbor told me when we came back last year.

LAUREN'S HAIR IS gray.

We book the same Airbnb every year, for five days. I think the owners believe it's some kind of way of honoring what we lost. A ritual of remembrance.

They don't know about the bowl of porridge we make and leave in the fridge, or that we make sure to put a big pat of butter on it, as I now know is traditional.

They don't know that it never works.

Or that I don't smoke anymore.

ON EVERY TRIP, each morning when I wake, I keep my eyes closed for a while, and listen. Hoping to hear a noise from the sleeping loft. Any kind of noise.

A quiet snore, or the sound of someone turning over. Some sign

that my little boy is back. That he's up there.

But he never is.

A M BREWS

ST. AMBREWS WELL

DAVID A. SUTTON

David A. Sutton is the recipient of the World Fantasy Award, the International Horror Guild Award, and twelve British Fantasy Awards for editing magazines and anthologies (*Fantasy Tales*, *Dark Voices*: *The Pan Book of Horror*, and *Dark Terrors: The Gollancz Book of Horror*). His other anthologies include *New Writings in Horror & the Supernatural*, *The Satyr's Head & Other Tales of Terror*, *Phantoms of Venice*, *Haunts of Horror*, and *Darker Terrors*.

He has also been a horror fiction writer since the 1960s, with stories appearing widely in anthologies and magazines, including *Best New Horror*, *Final Shadows*, *The Mammoth Book of Merlin*, *Beneath the Ground*, *Shadows Over Innsmouth*, and *The Ghosts & Scholars Book of Folk Horror*. His short stories are collected in *Clinically Dead & Other Tales of the Supernatural*, *Dead Water and Other Weird Tales*, and *En Vacances*, and he is also the proprietor of Shadow Publishing, a small press specializing in collections and anthologies.

"I first came across the mysterious St. Ambrews Well around 1971," remembers the author, "and have always been drawn to it whenever I've revisited the Cornwall village of Crantock. The very ancient carving is long

gone, replaced with a pale imitation that lacks the sinister atmosphere of its predecessor. But I was stimulated recently to write an article about it in relation to M. R. James's three 'well' stories.

"That article then motivated me to write this folk horror story, and it seemed a good idea to set the tale within my childhood memories of caravan holidays in the South West of England. Happy memories by and large, but the myths and legends of the area have always colored my thoughts and inspired my imagination."

. . . A wooden door in a Cornish lane conceals a well that has been sacred for at least a thousand years . . .

—John Sharkey, *Celtic Mysteries*

SOME FRIENDSHIPS THAT begin in childhood last a lifetime. Sometimes, when puberty dogs the soul and the flesh, and a girl intrudes, boys who stuck with you through thick and thin suddenly find an excuse to tag you as an enemy. But the memories of early friendships remain to glow like a preternatural aura. No one knows how long a comradeship will last, but one thing's for sure—it might be fleeting; it might be lifelong—it's usually soundly anchored in the everyday. But, given the fragility of the boundary between commonplace reality and the gauzy veil that obscures the uncanny realm, there are other reasons a companionship might end. Ones not at all nice. Not jealousy or a fight; worse than that. Something with a soul as dark as the firmament between stars.

THE WRINKLES IN the domed, green-swarded hills drew Billy's eyes down to the estuary below, cliffs splitting craggily downward, gray rocky outcrops, tide pools and wet sand spread along the

inlet. The ebb tide left the river Gannel to meander seaward in loops and swirls of brackish water, where oystercatchers peeped and dipped their amber beaks. At low tide the railless wooden footbridge across to Penpol Creek briefly surfaced above the water. A transient walkway. Billy and Alan were able to cross safely, avoiding the hazardous tidal mud.

Back at the caravan his parents had rented for the week, Billy's Airfix sailing ship waited, half built. Humbrol enamel paints in little tins, and glue-spotted instructions, lay spread out on the piece of hardboard that doubled up as a makeshift worktable. HMS *Beagle* would very soon be complete, ready for its maiden voyage.

"How long's this walk goin' to take?" Billy asked, frustrated now that the last section of bridge had inconveniently dipped into the sandy mud, allowing his shoes to squelch deeply enough to wet his socks. He stamped his feet and splashed onto dry land.

Billy always wanted to be doing something practical, Alan had realized shortly after their friendship began, with not a little unspoken derision. When they first became friends, it was his latest plastic kit, which he'd glue together and painstakingly paint from his tubs of enamels. Billy worshiped detail and he loved accuracy. He had a way of making Alan join in. And, Alan admitted, for a while, he also took up plastic construction kits; Spitfires and Sherman tanks were his limit though. He couldn't face weeks on end fiddling about with the hundreds of tiny pieces that came with old sailing ships. And somehow, on the models he put together, the glue always got onto the outer surfaces and melted the plastic. It was frustrating and disheartening. And the smell! He sometimes thought that Billy did them because he was hooked on the chemicals in the glue.

Now though, Alan's parents could hardly afford the rent on their caravan, let alone forking out on expensive models. His father was finding it difficult to hold down a job with his up-and-down moods.

Resentfully Alan said, “Oh, forget about that blarsted kit! I know that’s what you was thinking about. We’re after something much more interestin’.” He charged ahead of Billy, stepping onto and off the partially submerged riverbank without the mud rising above the welts on his sneakers.

“I’m only askin’, Alan.” Billy had almost always shortened Alan to “Al” and never used his full name, which signified that he was becoming anxious about their expedition. Alan smiled inwardly. He was not beyond dishing out casual cruelty, even on his best friend.

“Not scared, by any chance?” Alan giggled as Billy struggled farther onto the grassy slope.

“Nope.” Billy slumped down onto his backside, despondent. He rolled up his sweater sleeves and took off his shoes one at a time, wiping sticky mud off the scuffed black leather onto the morning’s wet grass. He added, as much to change the subject as to hide his discontent, “Mum’ll go nuts when she sees this.”

Alan sighed. He wanted this to be an adventure, like the Famous Five on their camping holiday, the one where they encounter the ghost train. His ghost was weirder though—the “Gannel Crake.” He’d read about it in the booklet on Cornwall’s ghosts that his father had given to him to look at, while the two families had traveled by train to their destination.

The Crake, Alan had read, was the name given to a terrifying sound heard over the Gannel by day or by night. It might simply be the call of a vixen—Alan doubted that a fox would bark in the daytime—or perhaps it was an unusual bird. Or the wail of a “Spriggan,” a mischievous sprite, another term he had gleaned from the book about ghosts. He could hear a strange cry now, as if in recalling the description he had summoned the creature itself.

“Hear that, Billy? It might be the Crake.”

Billy struggled back into his shoes and wiped the mud from his hands onto his shorts, making them even dirtier than they already were. His white shirt cuffs now sported decorative muddy

bracelets. He groaned, thinking about his mum's annoyance when she saw how grubby he'd gotten.

"Well?" Alan asked. "Are you listenin', dummy?"

Billy concentrated. "If you think that's the ghost, it ain't," he snorted. "That's an oystercatcher."

"No, not them, listen!" Alan paused. "'The cry of a tortured human soul . . . like a thousand voices pent-up in misery, with one long wail dying away in the distance.'" He used a posh voice to quote by memory from the booklet.

Billy heard the part-warbling, part-screaming sound, and it was strange, eerie even, but he knew what it was. "And that's a curlew."

Still, Billy shivered as the cool morning breeze whispered up the channel, shaking the spiky stems of marram grass. The sky, a pale-blue sheet, absent of clouds as yet, was a flat ceiling held up by the rising hills; distant cottages were folded into the valleys, with gleaming sun-skimmed windows peeping, hooded eyes watching them both, waiting for them, Billy thought, to commit some sin they didn't even know was a sin.

Alan frowned his annoyance. He gazed across the estuary. "The tide's risin'." Seawater was already lapping over the wooden slats of the footbridge. "We'll 'ave to go back the long way," he added unnecessarily.

Billy sighed. "At least I won't 'ave any mud to paddle through!"

"And we might still 'ear the Crake; we've got to walk up to Crantock to get back to the caravans."

Being realistic, Billy didn't think the Crake was at all likely. First off, with twenty-four hours in a day, what was the chance they'd hear it during the hour or two they spent there? And secondly, he wasn't at all sure he believed in ghosts and ghoulies anyway. And thirdly, he suddenly added a thought: his mum would be worried sick as to where he had gone at the crack of dawn. It was Alan's insistent whispered coaxing that had gotten him out of bed and out the caravan window while his parents

slept, and which he now very much regretted doing.

They began to walk in silence, over the sand dunes, through whispering grasses, and up along the coastal path toward the descent to the beach at Crantock. Sea pinks jutted, shivering in clusters out of rocky outcrops. A lone, fleeting gull laughed above them, *you foolish boys on your adventure to nowhere*. Alan desperately wanted to hear the scream of the Gannel Crake and silently cursed the seagull for mocking him.

Above them, in the green downy creases of the hills, the occasional bent, windswept tree persevered, withered branches clawing like witches' knobbly arms, with fluttering leaves for fingers. A chill wind shivered up the estuary, bringing the tide with it. Rippling below them the seawater shimmered, shiny as blue-and-white marbles, as the morning sun progressed in its daily ritual.

Billy stared back the way they had come. "Bridge's right underwater now," he said, thankful not to face crossing the river again.

We're cut off, thought Alan, zipping up his corduroy bomber jacket against the breeze. Between here and the ocean and the beach road into the village, there's nothing but us and the Crake.

Both boys' parents, in their respective caravans, would be awake, getting breakfast ready. Hanging out a bit of washing. Fussing over the tidying-up. Having cold showers in the hated slimy shower block. Dad would be off to the shop to get his morning paper and packet of Woodbines. There was something briefly warm and comforting about Alan's thoughts.

Yet, here, isolated, the other outside could get in. Alan could feel it. He was in the belly of the beast. One made of the sky and hills, and he had been swallowed up; a food particle in the mouth of a whale.

"All the waders have gone," Billy stated. "Just that . . . man?"

Alan followed Billy's gesture. There was a black-swathed figure, wearing Wellington boots, further inland up the estuary,

apparently walking in the mud where the tide had not yet reached. If human it was stooped like a dwarf, but might just be someone bent over, searching for shellfish. “Could be the Crake,” Alan suggested, “’cept that you *only* ever hear it.”

Billy decided to play along with his friend’s imagination. “But it could be a human ghost. A drownded sailor, searchin’ for ’is sunken ship.” He thought about his model and Charles Darwin and voyages across vast oceans, the tideless immensity of the ocean.

“Yeah! Or a dead fisherman, wanderin’ the beach forever, lookin’ for his mermaid.”

“*Or the dead rising from Langurroc*.” Both boys jumped a mile at the sound of another’s voice and spun around to face a stranger approaching from behind them on the cliff path.

The man was tall and weather-beaten. He had on a wool cap, a tweed coat, and long, knee-length shorts. Below bony knees and gray wool socks, he wore weathered walking boots. In his fist he held a handmade walking stick.

“Didn’t expec’ to see another soul on the path this time a’ day,” the man said. “Let alone a pair of ghosts!” He took a pipe out of his pocket and began to tamp down tobacco.

“We’re not—” Billy began, before he realized the man was joking.

“But we’re lookin’ for the Crake,” Alan added. The old man was a local, judging by his accent. He’d know the ghost story.

“Ah, *that* one,” the stranger mused, smirking.

“You’ve ’eard him?” Alan asked enthusiastically.

“He’s just messing with us,” Billy whispered in his friend’s ear. But the man frightened him a little.

He’d lit his pipe, and a fume of smelly smoke billowed from his mouth. He clenched the pipe between uneven yellow teeth.

“Eh. But what makes ya think it’s a he, maw?” he asked through clamped teeth, glaring down at Alan.

“Well . . . well . . .” Alan was also afraid, Billy could tell from the hesitation in his voice.

“It’s an *it*. That’s what it is. Now, run along to your mother’s skirts, afor ye hear it, afor you’ll not get it out of your heads. Eh!”

Both Billy and Alan scuttled awkwardly along the narrow path, brushing past spiky gorse bushes, before switching to a run to put several more yards between them and the old man. Looking round, they saw the stranger wave his stick at them. Whether it was a friendly gesture or a threatening one they couldn’t be sure. But it hurried them on.

Before long they had descended the cliff path down to the beach, and had turned at a right angle onto the sand-strewn road leading inland to Crantock.

“What was he on about?” Billy said, confident to speak now that the old man was well out of sight. “Old duffer.”

“Langurroc, that’s what,” Alan answered. “I read about it in the ghost book.”

“So what?”

“It’s a lost city under the sea, I think.” He picked at his memories. “Yeah, the place was cursed and everyone drowned. Like, they was washed out t’sea.”

“Well, we’re not lost, look here’s the village comin’ up ahead,” Billy indicated, his mood brightening. The tall Cornish hedgerows, with their ubiquitous companions, the foxgloves and ferns, were giving way intermittently to thatched cottages and trim, flower-festooned gardens beyond low, lichen-mottled walls.

Unexpectedly, Alan grabbed his friend’s shoulder, dragging him backward. “Look at *that*!” He pointed at the hedge in front of them, at road level, where somebody was staring out at them.

“What is it?” Billy shrugged off his friend’s hand and walked over to a lump of rock that partially obscured a human face, a long slim face, with what appeared to be some kind of flat-topped helmet on its head. A face watching them as a suspicious sentry might. The country lane was partially in shadow from the high hedgerows, and in the subdued light, the face was peculiar enough to be a guardian. Billy studied the face, the narrowed eyes and the

tight-lipped mouth that gave away nothing of its disposition, except perhaps contempt. Yet, Billy reflected, it might be smiling, a secret smile, a smile half hidden, so you weren't quite sure if it was exhibiting displeasure or not.

Alan now approached the face and knelt and brushed away the ivy that partially obscured his discovery. The face was a bas-relief carving in a rectangle of timber, very old and weatherworn. The piece of wood was surrounded by plain stone columns and a lintel, and stood about three feet high and a couple of feet wide.

Iron hinges were attached to the timber. "It's a door . . ." Alan realized. "And look, there's an 'ole where the knob would've been."

"And," Billy added excitedly, as he brushed years of dust and cobwebs off some carved lettering on the lintel, "It tells us what it is. He traced the chiseled letters with a forefinger as he slowly spelled out the words: "Saint . . . Ambrews . . . Well."

Alan shivered as the sun slipped behind unexpected clouds that left the country lane in deep shade. The Crake was genuinely mysterious, because it was such an unknown thing. So, a carved face in a door was nothing . . . yet something about it made him hesitate. Its age, maybe, or its inscrutable, staring expression.

"Shall we open it?" Billy asked matter-of-factly.

Alan hesitated, confused. "How can a well be behind a door in a wall? There should be a round wall and a bucket hangin' down, and not sideways."

"I d'know. D'you think it's the Crake's lair?" Billy scoffed, turning on Alan's gullibility.

Billy knelt beside Alan and they looked upon the door as if they beheld a shrine to some ancient god, but for whom they had no offering, no sacrifice.

"Don't be daft. It's a well, like it says, but a bit of a funny one," Alan decided, regaining a little courage. "But there might be treasure hidden inside."

Now it was Billy's uneasiness that returned. "Maybe we should

leave it alone. That phizzog don't look like it wants us t'open the door. See, it's got a chain carved round its chin, like a strap holdin' on a soldier's helmet. And, it might belong to somebody."

"Like gold Roman coins." Alan ignored Billy's suggestion. "Or hidden cash from a bank robbery. We could be rich!" Or at least he could be; he already regarded Billy's parents as well-off.

Without hesitation, he poked his finger into the hole where the presumed handle had been. And yanked.

"Maybe it's locked," Billy said when the door didn't budge.

"Just . . . a . . . bit . . . stiff," Alan puffed as he used the fingers of both hands to wrest the door open. "Here, do something useful pansy pants, an' pull that rock out-a the way," Alan ordered as the door began to squeal and the iron bands creak, flaking off eons of rust.

"It don't frighten me," Billy snapped, but reluctantly did as he was told. He ducked under his friend's arms and grabbed the rock blocking the door from opening fully. With an effort, he rolled it aside and suddenly the well door was swinging wide open.

THE CARAVAN DOOR unexpectedly rattled with a metallic *rattattat*. After about half a minute's delay, Mary opened the door in surprise; her watch said seven-thirty. "Mornin' Gwen, up with the larks, then?" A cool breeze was tempered by the early morning sun rising over the camp's tree-lined perimeter. The field's manicured turf was dotted with caravans, most still with curtains drawn.

Gwen was frowning. "Is Billy in there?" she said quickly, peering around Mary as best she could. "I've done his breakfast. But he's not in his bed."

This was the first time the two couples had been on holiday together with their boys, although they had been neighbors since

Mary's husband, Ron, had been demobbed and they'd moved to the house next door to Gwen and Tony's in the Midlands.

"Well, no, why would he be?" Mary asked, fiddling with the hair grips restraining her long curls behind her ears.

"I mean, is he with Alan?"

Mary moved away from the door to allow Gwen in. "I'll have a look."

"Who's 'at," a male voice slurred from under the blankets on the bed settee.

"Only me—Gwen. Sorry to wake you up, Ron. I've come for Billy . . ."

The caravan had a small bedroom at the far end beyond the kitchenette. Mary pushed open the door with, "Alan, is Billy with you—" She stared at the thrown-back bedsheets and the scatter of Alan's comics on the floor. And the open window. "The little bugger," she whispered to herself.

Gwen stood waiting, her back to the doorway of her own identical caravan opposite. When Mary rejoined her, gesturing an absence with her hands, Gwen said, "I expect they're out playing, then, if he's not here. It's just not like Billy though. He'd tell me if he was going out to play."

"That'll be it," Mary agreed. "They'll be down the road, playing on the beach, havin' a paddle." Her husband stirred and yawned. "You can go back to sleep now, Ron."

Gwen frowned, thinking about the beach and the sea. "Billy can't swim . . . perhaps we should call the police . . . ?" Smoothing the palms of both hands across her pale cheeks distractedly, she added, "Just to be on the safe side?"

"Let 'em play," Ron said, lifting his head above the bedsheets. "Kids, eh? They'll not get into any mischief. Alan's a good lad. Kids need a bit of freedom. It's not like we had it in El Alamein."

"Billy's not had a holiday like this before," Gwen's voice trembled. "I'm worried about him."

"The desert was anything but a holiday," Ron continued.

“I wish you’d shut up about the war, Ron!”

“I mean, Tony’s up and about, he could go and find us a phone box and—”

“Oh, *no*,” Mary almost shouted. “I think Ron’s right. We don’t want to cause any fuss with the police. It’d be so bloody embarrassin’ if we reported our sons missing and they turned up five minutes later.” She began to put on an apron to start breakfast. “Besides, they’re bound to be at the beach, makin’ sandcastles.”

Gwen hesitated, only half convinced to leave the situation unresolved, when she noticed a booklet she recognized on the plastic tabletop. She picked it up, frowning. “*Cornish Ghosts*. Didn’t I see Alan reading this on the train?” she asked. “I don’t think he should’ve been looking at such rubbish. And all those comic books he had in his duffle bag as well . . .”

Ron poked his head above the sheets again. “Nothing wrong with that. Wish I’d had ’em as a kid.”

Mary concurred, “Alan’s a decent lad, and we can’t afford expensive things like you can with Billy. So, he has his comics instead.” Then she added, “They’ll be back soon. Why don’t you run along, Gwen, there’s a love, an’ I can get on with Ron’s bacon and egg.”

“But *ghost* stories. God knows *where* they’ve gone.” Gwen slapped the book onto the table, panic beginning to emerge in her voice. “You’ve put *things* into Alan’s head and he’s leading Billy astray.”

“Don’t be bloody daft.” Indignantly, Mary grabbed the book and threw it onto the windowsill. “It’s just a soddin’ book.”

“If you want to do something,” Ron interrupted, sitting up in bed, “get your ’alf-soaked Tony to get orf ’is backside and let him go off on a wild-goose chase.”

“*Don’t* you talk to me like that about Tony—”

“And you mollycoddle Billy too much, you do,” Ron added.

Gwen was close to tears. She turned to the open door, about to

step down from the caravan, wanting to respond with something equally disparaging about Ron. His boozing sprang to mind. But she couldn't find the words.

Outside the clouds had begun to gather, great cumulus billows. Gwen's husband was standing outside their van with a questioning expression on his face. But he wasn't looking to see where Gwen had gone. Instead Tony was gawping up at the sky. In the quiet of the moment, Gwen could hear the purr of the gas mantles behind her in Mary's caravan and the distinctive smell of stale beer.

An unexpected brightness lit up the sky, as if the bilious cloud above her had within it a giant light bulb that went on and then slowly off, as if the flash of lightning had been slowed down to a snail's pace. The green turf of the caravan park glowed luridly as she ran across the space between the two caravans and into Tony's arms. Tears smeared her eyes and her husband scowled. He didn't say anything; the clouds were lowering, lurching earthward, bestowing on Gwen an unsettling sensation of motion, inducing momentary vertigo. She swayed out of her husband's arms, and both Tony and Gwen turned to stare quizzically at Mary and Ron, he dressed just in his underpants, both of them now leaning out of their mobile home's door to watch the strange light and the way the clouds were plunging downward. Their attention turned to Gwen and Tony, distrustful expressions in their eyes, as if the peculiar lightning was somehow the fault of their holiday companions. And then their caravan door slammed shut, blocking out the newly wrought world.

THERE WAS A waft of escaping stale, stagnant-smelling air as the well door opened. Both boys started as the sky was illuminated abruptly by a single silver fork of lightning. Great cumulus slowly simmered in a gathering sky. But no thunderclap intervened as both boys mentally counted seconds—just a lingering silence, followed by another phosphorescent bolt.

“We *shouldn’t* ’ave done it!” Billy finally hissed, as if God had sent down an admonition, warning the well’s intruders to explore no further. “It might be a sign from the Almighty . . .”

Alan frowned and paused, drawing back on his haunches. He’d never attended Sunday School like Billy had. And his parents had never shown any interest in going to church. So, he only paid lip service to religion. “Nah. We ain’t gonna miss this oppertunity, ya nancy!”

A ripple of water gurgled from inside the dark interior of the well, as if it were sniggering, the evil chuckle of an imp, following by another peculiar croaking babble.

“It’s the pixies!” Alan cried, falling back and standing up, scaring himself.

Disturbed creatures, wet and slimy, began to crawl into the light, eyes blinking.

“Ha!” Billy barked, trembling relief in his voice. “It’s *only* frogs!” Three of the amphibians hopped out, clawing their way over the grassy hummocks of the verge.

“Ribbit, ribbit, ribbit,” Alan parodied the frogs as they made their escape across the sand-strewn road to crevices in the old stone wall opposite. “No piskies, he-he!” His relief was palpable, and he leaned down to punch Billy on the shoulder, attempting to disguise his own momentary fright with casual violence. “Scaredy-cat.”

Billy fell forward, rubbing his shoulder. “Don’t do that, Al, it hurt!” He was embarrassed, his face turned bright red even as his arm throbbed. He felt tears of shame starting in his eyes and he blinked rapidly. Alan had been as bloody frightened as him after all, Billy inwardly swore, so why should he have to take all the humiliation?

In front of them, the dark orifice of the well loomed like a hollow, silent laugh. The sun was relieved from shadow briefly by the roving clouds, and Billy saw some things shining within the depths of the hole. No, not shining, Billy reckoned, just white.

Deciding he needed to restore a sense of self-assurance in front of Alan, he reached his arm into the well's cave, even as he was thinking about the frogs as some manner of guardians, or warnings. "There's something else inside . . ."

Billy's hand disappeared into the well's twilight and his creased shirtsleeve became a ghostly, handless arm. He held his breath. He could sense Alan kneeling back down beside him, his friend's breaths on his neck as he leaned his chin on Billy's shoulder.

Hesitation began to turn to trepidation, but Billy was determined not to let Alan see it.

"G'wan then!" Alan gleefully shoved his friend's arm, Billy's palm crashing down, rolling over semi-smooth things submerged in a trickle of water, his fingers involuntarily grasping. He pulled loose from Alan, fell back, and threw his hand in the air, scattering the objects.

"*Bones!*" Alan shouted. Excitedly, reaching inside the well himself, he found more. "Tons of 'em."

Billy shrank back as Alan gathered them up in a pile. He could tell what they were straight away—from skeleton illustrations in his *Look and Learn* magazines—they were knucklebones.

"Think they're human?" Alan asked, gathering up a handful and scattering them as if they were dice.

Billy picked one up and examined it. Mostly darkish white and dirty, and with a pitted texture, suggesting great age. There was a roundness to the protrusions, as if they had been smoothed through use or had been filed.

"Yak. It's horrible." *Yes*, he thought, *human bone. Dead flesh, muscle, nerves, and blood had once coated them*. He threw it down with disgust.

"I know what they'm are," Alan said, tossing one casually into the air and catching it. "Jacks."

"What?" Billy asked.

"We can play jacks." At once the mysterious St. Ambrews Well was forgotten. "Back down at the beach." Alan was about to be off

on another adventure.

Billy thought for a minute, standing up. He brushed back an unruly hank of hair that had stuck sweatily to his forehead. “You mean ‘knucklebones,’ that’s what they’s called, what the game’s called.” He’d played it himself with funny-shaped metal pieces, but it felt wicked using real bones from somebody’s hands.

“’Cept we haven’t got no rubber ball, but it don’t matter.” Alan gathered up the bones in both hands. “C’mon! There’s a flat rock on the beach we can use.” Then he was off, running down the sand-swept lane back toward the estuary.

Billy wasn’t at all sure he wanted to play with dead bones, and hesitated. Also, he thought, should he shut the well door? It seemed improper to leave it open, like leaving a church door unlatched. He pushed it with his shoe and it grunted closed. Better, he thought, now they’d stolen its contents and let out its custodians. If he left it open people would know, and they would come searching for the culprits, and the first place the police would look would be the caravan park on the hill, and all the children would be asked awkward questions . . . and Billy knew he wouldn’t be able to lie about the theft.

Billy stole a glance at the mystifying carved face. Was it the face of St. Ambrews himself? Was *he* the protector and not the frogs? He was a saint, so he should be, thought Billy rationally. Yet that peculiar smile. It mocked him. He didn’t look at all saintly, more like the stone heads that grimaced from church walls —they didn’t look friendly either, even though they were carved in the house of God.

The lane grew dark as storm clouds once again lumbered across the sky, bearing heavily upon the tall drystone walls. It seemed like the only thing holding them aloft was the walls, and Billy felt as if he were in a tunnel. He shivered, goosebumps coarsening his arms. He ran after Alan, hoping to get warm.

As his shoes met the soft sand of the beach, Billy saw Alan sitting by a large, flat rock, practicing his technique. He grabbed

two bones in his right hand, tossed them into the air and turned the same hand palm down. The jacks spun and descended, Alan moving to catch them on the back of his hand. One rolled off at the same time as he steadied to retain the other.

Billy slowed his run to a walk, watching the tide ripple beyond where Alan sat. There were little whitecaps like silvery fish dipping and diving across the wavelets. Clouds merged across the sky, chilling out the sunlight, and as the tide drew back, pebbles like knucklebones chattered in the surf.

Alan was absorbed in his game, but noticed his friend moving toward him. “Hurry up, dumbbell, I’m guin’ to thrash ya!” Three jacks spun in the air and clattered back on the rock. Angrily, he grabbed four and tossed them. That was cheating; Billy knew that you had to catch all of your throw before you could increase the number of bones. And your opponent should be able to have his go.

Then the sea was rushing in again, and the hollow clatter of the four jacks on stone was engulfed by the greater sound of water scraping sand and shingle. The little silverfish waves chopped along the tide as it angled its way across the beach and swept up the Gannel estuary over to Billy’s right. Surf crashed and rolled. Clouds puffed out billows of themselves as if a great wind-god was hidden inside.

“I think the tide’s comin’ in!” Billy shouted, alarmed. He was still some yards away from his pal.

“Can’t be, not yet, hours to go,” Alan called back, distracted. Several more jacks flew and bounced, apparently flinging themselves off the rock. The river’s desultory meander to the sea was washed over by the incoming brine, contradicting Alan’s assertion. Jacks went airborne, caught in the strengthening breeze. Those that fell from his hand onto stone were scattered, as if angrily resisting their casual and impious treatment.

Sand blew off the dunes in hazy, pale streamers, and marram grass *click-clicked* as the tide-borne wind swept up the beach and

on inland. The translucent tidal surf fish chased one another across the bay and wallowed out in the estuary as Alan jumped down and began viciously kicking the bones into the water.

"*Don't* . . ." Billy had reached the flat rock and clambered on it just before seawater swirled around its perimeter. From his higher vantage point, he could see his friend now knee-deep in a tide pool, bending over, his hands fishing, as if something was driving him to recover the bones he had so casually discarded. Billy also realized for the first time that the tide's whitecaps, like shoals of whitebait created by the waves, were not the surf, or any kind of fish. But he didn't want to let his mind's eye tell him what it thought they were. He would be safe, he decided, so long as he was high up on the rock.

The tide swirled backward, leaving his perch resting in sand again, and Billy took the opportunity to scramble off the rock and run up the beach toward the dunes. After a brief climb up, he turned. Alan had now fallen over, and sat on his behind, pulling at his leg, which seemed to be stuck as if in a bog. It was embedded in sand right up to the knee.

"Al! *Alan!*" Billy's shouts were whipped off inland by the rising wind. He crawled higher up the dunes. The estuary was being swallowed by the premature tide, the Gannel disappearing under foaming water. Billy quickly realized that his friend would drown if he couldn't escape from the sand. He made to jump from the dunes, but hesitated. There was a shimmering out to sea as if sheet lightning flashed beyond the horizon. Alan was screaming now, but Billy only heard snatches of his wails, and saw that both of his legs were now deeply embedded. Yet there was something else not right. Billy watched the tide ease, wash out, leaving a jumble of gurgling white, misshapen stones on the beach all around Alan.

The water was no longer lapping over him, and that was when Billy could have taken his chance to save his pal, even if all he got was a punch on the arm for his efforts. But the sand was doing something strange to Alan's legs. It was reaching up out of the

shingle, gaunt arms and hands clothed in rotten, wet green rags. As Alan faced out to sea, his friend's face wasn't visible to him, but Billy was relieved he couldn't see clearly what his friend was experiencing at close quarters. Alan's shoulders were heaving, drawing in panicky, screeching breaths, faintly heard over the wind. If he hadn't known it to be Alan, it might be the Crake, he thought unkindly.

Alan's whole body began jerking—little sudden spasms. He was being drawn deeper into the sodden sand of the tide pool. In his mind, Billy conjured up some horrible sea creature, a sucking seaweed-thing with skeleton hands. Except it wasn't just in his head. Then the surf wallowed up again, veiling the clutching hands, and Alan was washed onto his back, his own arms flailing as he disappeared underwater.

Whatever had gotten him stuck, Alan was in terrible danger. It had to have been just sloppy quicksand, that's what Billy could say. He ran back down the lane as fast as he could, to alert Alan's parents. He'd tell them he couldn't swim, that was the truth. They'd understand. He wouldn't have been able to help Alan. Not that he would have dared to enter the water. Not with whatever the knucklebones had dredged up. But he couldn't say anything about *them* . . . he'd get a hiding for telling lies, and the situation was as bad as it could get without adding something nobody would believe.

As he tore past it, Billy shot a glance at the face on the door of St. Ambrews Well. Were the wooden eyes fixed on him as he ran? Billy thought they might be, but he couldn't stop. He was in tears. He had to tell his mum and dad; he was extremely upset because he didn't want to. He'd been taught always to tell the truth. But if he did, he was terrified that his revelation might unleash upon him whatever was now dragging Alan beneath the waves.

On the quiet, now empty country lane, the carving that might, or might not, have been St. Ambrews smiled unfathomably . . . as it had always done, for perhaps a thousand years.

STICKS

KARL EDWARD WAGNER

Karl Edward Wagner (1945–94) died at the ridiculously young age of forty-eight years old. He is remembered today as the insightful editor of fifteen volumes of *The Year's Best Horror Stories* series from DAW Books (1980–94) and an author of superior horror and fantasy fiction.

While still attending medical school, Wagner set about creating his own character, Kane, the Mystic Swordsman. After the first book in the series, *Darkness Weaves with Many Shades*, was published in 1970, Wagner relinquished his chance to become a doctor and turned to writing full-time. *Death Angel's Shadow*, a collection of three original Kane novellas, was followed by the novels *Bloodstone* and *Dark Crusade* and the collections *Night Winds* and *The Book of Kane*. These books were later reissued in the omnibus volumes *Gods in Darkness* and *Midnight Sun* from Night Shade Books.

Wagner's superb horror fiction appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies and was collected in *In a Lonely Place*, *Why Not You and I?*, *Author's Choice Monthly Issue 2: Unthreatened by the Morning Light*, and the posthumous *Exorcisms and Ecstasies*. More recently, all the author's weird and supernatural fiction has been brought

together by Centipede Press as part of the publisher's Masters of the Weird Tale series.

A feature-length documentary about Wagner, *The Last Wolf*, was released to critical acclaim at the end of 2020.

In his introduction to *In a Lonely Place*, Peter Straub described "Sticks" as the author's "clearest expression of devotion and mastery of the pulp tradition, being simultaneously a *homage* to Lee Brown Coye, the artist who created many of pulpdom's strongest images, and one of the cleverest modern additions to Lovecraft's Cthulhu myth."

As Wagner himself revealed: "The story is really Lee Brown Coye's and is about Lee Brown Coye . . . . Coye had described the events upon which 'Sticks' is based to me, and when Stuart David Schiff decided to bring out a special Lee Brown Coye issue of *Whispers*, I stole time from my final few months of medical school to write a story inspired by Coye's experiences. 'Sticks' is shot through with in-jokes and references which the serious fantasy/ horror fan will recognize.

"I wrote the story as a favor and tribute to Lee, and I never expected it to be read by anyone beyond the thousand or so fans who read *Whispers*. To my surprise, 'Sticks' became one of my best-known and best-liked stories. It won the British Fantasy Award and was a runner-up in the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction. The story has been anthologized numerous times and translated into several languages. It was broadcast on National Public Radio on Halloween 1982 and was to have been produced for the short-lived television series *Darkroom*. Not bad for an in-*joke*."

I

THE LASHED-TOGETHER framework of sticks jutted from a small cairn alongside the stream. Colin Leverett studied it in perplexment—half a dozen odd lengths of branch, wired together at cross-angles for no fathomable purpose. It reminded him unpleasantly of some bizarre crucifix, and he wondered what might lie beneath the cairn.

It was the spring of 1942—the kind of day to make the War seem distant and unreal, although the draft notice waited on his desk. In a few days Leverett would lock his rural studio, wonder if he would see it again—be able to use its pens and brushes and carving tools when he did return. It was goodbye to the woods and streams of upstate New York, too. No fly rods, no tramps through the countryside in Hitler's Europe. No point in putting off fishing that trout stream he had driven past once, exploring back roads of the Otselic Valley.

Mann Brook—so it was marked on the old Geological Survey map—ran southeast of DeRuyter. The unfrequented country road crossed over a stone bridge old before the first horseless carriage, but Leverett's Ford eased across and onto the shoulder. Taking fly rod and tackle, he included a pocket flask and tied an iron skillet to his belt. He'd work his way downstream a few miles. By afternoon he'd lunch on fresh trout, maybe some bullfrog legs.

It was a fine clear stream, though difficult to fish as dense bushes hung out from the bank, broken with stretches of open water hard to work without being seen. But the trout rose boldly to his fly, and Leverett was in fine spirits.

From the bridge the valley along Mann Brook began as fairly open pasture, but half a mile downstream the land had fallen into disuse and was thick with second-growth evergreens and scrub apple trees. Another mile, and the scrub merged with dense forest, which continued unbroken. The land here, he had learned, had been taken over by the state many years back.

As Leverett followed the stream, he noted the remains of an old railroad embankment. No vestige of tracks or ties—only the

embankment itself, overgrown with large trees. The artist rejoiced in the beautiful drywall culverts spanning the stream as it wound through the valley. To his mind it seemed eerie, this forgotten railroad running straight and true through virtual wilderness.

He could imagine an old wood-burner with its conical stack, steaming along through the valley dragging two or three wooden coaches. It must be a branch of the old Oswego Midland Railroad, he decided, abandoned rather suddenly in the 1870s. Leverett, who had a memory for detail, knew of it from a story his grandfather told of riding the line in 1871 from Otselic to DeRuyter on his honeymoon. The engine had so labored up the steep grade over Crumb Hill that he got off to walk alongside. Probably that sharp grade was the reason for the line's abandonment.

When he came across a scrap of board nailed to several sticks set into a stone wall, his darkest thought was that it might read no trespassing. Curiously, though the board was weathered featureless, the nails seemed quite new. Leverett scarcely gave it much thought, until a short distance beyond he came upon another such contrivance. And another.

Now he scratched at the day's stubble on his long jaw. This didn't make sense. A prank? But on whom? A child's game? No, the arrangement was far too sophisticated. As an artist, Leverett appreciated the craftsmanship of the work—the calculated angles and lengths, the designed intricacy of the maddeningly inexplicable devices. There was something distinctly uncomfortable about their effect.

Leverett reminded himself that he had come here to fish and continued downstream. But as he worked around a thicket he again stopped in puzzlement.

Here was a small open space with more of the stick lattices and an arrangement of flat stones laid out on the ground. The stones—likely taken from one of the many drywall culverts—made a pattern maybe twenty by fifteen feet, that at first glance resembled

a ground plan for a house. Intrigued, Leverett quickly saw that this was not so. If the ground plan for anything, it would have to be for a small maze.

The bizarre lattice structures were all around. Sticks from trees and bits of board nailed together in fantastic array. They defied description; no two seemed alike. Some were only one or two sticks lashed together in parallel or at angles. Others were worked into complicated lattices of dozens of sticks and boards. One could have been a child's tree house— it was built in three planes, but was so abstract and useless that it could be nothing more than an insane conglomeration of sticks and wire. Sometimes the contrivances were stuck in a pile of stones or a wall, maybe thrust into the railroad embankment or nailed to a tree.

It should have been ridiculous. It wasn't. Instead it seemed somehow sinister—these utterly inexplicable, meticulously constructed stick lattices spread through a wilderness where only a tree-grown embankment or a forgotten stone wall gave evidence that man had ever passed through. Leverett forgot about trout and frog legs, instead dug into his pockets for a notebook and stub of pencil. Busily he began to sketch the more intricate structures. Perhaps someone could explain them; perhaps there was something to their insane complexity that warranted closer study for his own work.

Leverett was roughly two miles from the bridge when he came upon the ruins of a house. It was an unlovely colonial farmhouse, box-shaped and gambrel-roofed, fast falling into the ground. Windows were dark and empty; the chimneys on either end looked ready to topple. Rafters showed through open spaces in the roof, and the weathered boards of the walls had in places rotted away to reveal hewn timber beams. The foundation was stone and disproportionately massive. From the size of the unmortared stone blocks, its builder had intended the foundation to stand forever.

The house was nearly swallowed up by undergrowth and rampant lilac bushes, but Leverett could distinguish what had

been a lawn with imposing shade trees. Farther back were gnarled and sickly apple trees and an overgrown garden where a few lost flowers still bloomed—wan and serpentine from years in the wild. The stick lattices were everywhere—the lawn, the trees, even the house were covered with the uncanny structures. They reminded Leverett of a hundred misshapen spiderwebs—grouped so closely together as to almost ensnare the entire house and clearing. Wondering, he sketched page on page of them, as he cautiously approached the abandoned house.

He wasn't certain just what he expected to find inside. The aspect of the farmhouse was frankly menacing, standing as it did in gloomy desolation where the forest had devoured the works of man—where the only sign that man had been here in this century were these insanely wrought latticeworks of sticks and board. Some might have turned back at this point. Leverett, whose fascination for the macabre was evident in his art, instead was intrigued. He drew a rough sketch of the farmhouse and the grounds, overrun with the enigmatic devices, with thickets of hedges and distorted flowers. He regretted that it might be years before he could capture the eeriness of this place on scratchboard or canvas.

The door was off its hinges, and Leverett gingerly stepped within, hoping that the flooring remained sound enough to bear even his sparse frame. The afternoon sun pierced the empty windows, mottling the decaying floorboards with great blotches of light. Dust drifted in the sunlight. The house was empty—stripped of furnishings other than indistinct tangles of rubble mounded over with decay and the drifted leaves of many seasons.

Someone had been here, and recently. Someone who had literally covered the mildewed walls with diagrams of the mysterious lattice structures. The drawings were applied directly to the walls, crisscrossing the rotting wallpaper and crumbling plaster in bold black lines. Some of vertiginous complexity covered an entire wall like a mad mural. Others were small, only a few

crossed lines, and reminded Leverett of cuneiform glyphics.

His pencil hurried over the pages of his notebook. Leverett noted with fascination that a number of the drawings were recognizable as schematics of lattices he had earlier sketched. Was this then the planning room for the madman or educated idiot who had built these structures? The gouges etched by the charcoal into the soft plaster appeared fresh—done days or months ago, perhaps.

A darkened doorway opened into the cellar. Were there drawings there as well? And what else? Leverett wondered if he should dare it. Except for streamers of light that crept through cracks in the flooring, the cellar was in darkness.

"Hello?" he called. "Anyone here?" It didn't seem silly just then. These stick lattices hardly seemed the work of a rational mind. Leverett wasn't enthusiastic with the prospect of encountering such a person in this dark cellar. It occurred to him that virtually anything might transpire here, and no one in the world of 1942 would ever know.

And that in itself was too great a fascination for one of Leverett's temperament. Carefully he started down the cellar stairs. They were stone and thus solid, but treacherous with moss and debris.

The cellar was enormous—even more so in the darkness. Leverett reached the foot of the steps and paused for his eyes to adjust to the damp gloom. An earlier impression recurred to him. The cellar was too big for the house. Had another dwelling stood here originally—perhaps destroyed and rebuilt by one of lesser fortune? He examined the stonework. Here were great blocks of gneiss that might support a castle. On closer look they reminded him of a fortress—for the drywall technique was startlingly Mycenaean.

Like the house above, the cellar appeared to be empty, although without light Leverett could not be certain what the shadows hid. There seemed to be darker areas of shadow along

sections of the foundation wall, suggesting openings to chambers beyond. Leverett began to feel uneasy in spite of himself.

There was something here—a large table-like bulk in the center of the cellar. Where a few ghosts of sunlight drifted down to touch its edges, it seemed to be of stone. Cautiously he crossed the stone paving to where it loomed—waist-high, maybe eight feet long and less wide. A roughly shaped slab of gneiss, he judged, and supported by pillars of unmortared stone. In the darkness he could only get a vague conception of the object. He ran his hand along the slab. It seemed to have a groove along its edge.

His groping fingers encountered fabric, something cold and leathery and yielding. Mildewed harness, he guessed in distaste.

Something closed on his wrist, set icy nails into his flesh.

Leverett screamed and lunged away with frantic strength. He was held fast, but the object on the stone slab pulled upward.

A sickly beam of sunlight came down to touch one end of the slab. It was enough. As Leverett struggled backward and the thing that held him heaved up from the stone table, its face passed through the beam of light.

It was a lich's face—desiccated flesh tight over its skull. Filthy strands of hair were matted over its scalp, tattered lips were drawn away from broken yellowed teeth, and, sunken in their sockets, eyes that should be dead were bright with hideous life.

Leverett screamed again, desperate with fear. His free hand clawed the iron skillet tied to his belt. Ripping it loose, he smashed at the nightmarish face with all his strength.

For one frozen instant of horror, the sunlight let him see the skillet crush through the mold-eaten forehead like an axe—cleaving the dry flesh and brittle bone. The grip on his wrist failed. The cadaverous face fell away, and the sight of its caved-in forehead and unblinking eyes from between which thick blood had begun to ooze would awaken Leverett from nightmare on countless nights.

But now Leverett tore free and fled. And when his aching legs

faltered as he plunged headlong through the scrub-growth, he was spurred to desperate energy by the memory of the footsteps that had stumbled up the cellar stairs behind him.

II

WHEN COLIN LEVERETT returned from the War, his friends marked him a changed man. He had aged. There were streaks of gray in his hair; his springy step had slowed. The athletic leanness of his body had withered to an unhealthy gauntness. There were indelible lines to his face, and his eyes were haunted.

More disturbing was an alteration of temperament. A mordant cynicism had eroded his earlier air of whimsical asceticism. His fascination with the macabre had assumed a darker mood, a morbid obsession that his old acquaintances found disquieting. But it had been that kind of a war, especially for those who had fought through the Apennines.

Leverett might have told them otherwise, had he cared to discuss his nightmarish experience on Mann Brook. But Leverett kept his own counsel, and when he grimly recalled that creature he had struggled with in the abandoned cellar, he usually convinced himself it had only been a derelict—a crazy hermit whose appearance had been distorted by the poor light and his own imagination. Nor had his blow more than glanced off the man's forehead, he reasoned, since the other had recovered quickly enough to give chase. It was best not to dwell upon such matters, and this rational explanation helped restore sanity when he awoke from nightmares of that face.

Thus Colin Leverett returned to his studio, and once more plied his pens and brushes and carving knives. The pulp magazines, where fans had acclaimed his work before the War, welcomed him back with long lists of assignments. There were commissions from

galleries and collectors, unfinished sculptures and wooden models. Leverett busied himself.

There were problems now. *Short Stories* returned a cover painting as "too grotesque." The publishers of a new anthology of horror stories sent back a pair of his interior drawings—"too gruesome, especially the rotted, bloated faces of those hanged men." A customer returned a silver figurine, complaining that the martyred saint was too thoroughly martyred. Even *Weird Tales*, after heralding his return to its ghoul-haunted pages, began returning illustrations they considered "too strong, even for our readers."

Leverett tried half-heartedly to tone things down, found the results vapid and uninspired. Eventually the assignments stopped trickling in. Leverett, becoming more the recluse as years went by, dismissed the pulp days from his mind. Working quietly in his isolated studio, he found a living doing occasional commissioned pieces and gallery work, from time to time selling a painting or sculpture to major museums. Critics had much praise for his bizarre abstract sculptures.

III

THE WAR WAS twenty-five years history when Colin Leverett received a letter from a good friend of the pulp days—Prescott Brandon, now editor-publisher of Gothic House, a small press that specialized in books of the weird-fantasy genre. Despite a lapse in correspondence of many years, Brandon's letter began in his typically direct style:

> *The Eyrie/Salem, Mass./Aug. 2*
> *To the Macabre Hermit of the Midlands:*
> *Colin,*

I'm putting together a deluxe 3-volume collection of H. Kenneth Allard's horror stories. I well recall that Kent's stories were personal favorites of yours. How about shambling forth from retirement and illustrating these for me? Will need 2-colour jackets and a dozen line interiors each. Would hope that you can startle fandom with some especially ghastly drawings for these—something different from the hackneyed skulls and bats and werewolves carting off half-dressed ladies.

Interested? I'll send you the materials and details, and you can have a free hand. Let us hear.

—Scotty

Leverett was delighted. He felt some nostalgia for the pulp days, and he had always admired Allard's genius in transforming visions of cosmic horror into convincing prose. He wrote Brandon an enthusiastic reply.

He spent hours rereading the stories for inclusion, making notes and preliminary sketches. No squeamish subeditors to offend here; Scotty meant what he said. Leverett bent to his task with maniacal relish.

Something different, Scotty had asked. A free hand. Leverett studied his pencil sketches critically. The figures seemed headed in the right direction, but the drawings needed something more—something that would inject the mood of sinister evil that pervaded Allard's work. Grinning skulls and leathery bats? Trite. Allard demanded more.

The idea had inexorably taken hold of him. Perhaps because Allard's tales evoked that same sense of horror; perhaps because Allard's visions of crumbling Yankee farmhouses and their depraved secrets so reminded him of that spring afternoon at Mann Brook . . .

Although he had refused to look at it since the day he had staggered in, half dead from terror and exhaustion, Leverett

perfectly recalled where he had flung his notebook. He retrieved it from the back of a seldom-used file, thumbed through the wrinkled pages thoughtfully. These hasty sketches reawakened the sense of foreboding evil, the charnel horror of that day. Studying the bizarre lattice patterns, it seemed impossible to Leverett that others would not share his feeling of horror that the stick structures evoked in him.

He began to sketch bits of stick latticework into his pencil roughs. The sneering faces of Allard's degenerate creatures took on an added shadow of menace. Leverett nodded, pleased with the effect.

IV

SOME MONTHS AFTERWARD, a letter from Brandon informed Leverett he had received the last of the Allard drawings and was enormously pleased with the work. Brandon added a postscript:

> *For god's sake Colin—what is it with these insane sticks you've got poking up everywhere in the illos! The damn things get really creepy after a while. How on earth did you get onto this?*

Leverett supposed he owed Brandon some explanation. Dutifully he wrote a lengthy letter, setting down the circumstances of his experience at Mann Brook—omitting only the horror that had seized his wrist in the cellar. Let Brandon think him eccentric, but not madman and murderer.

Brandon's reply was immediate:

> *Colin—*
>
> *Your account of the Mann Brook episode is fascinating—and incredible! It reads like the start of one of Allard's*

stories! I have taken the liberty of forwarding your letter to Alexander Stefroi in Pelham. Dr. Stefroi is an earnest scholar of this region's history—as you may already know. I'm certain your account will interest him, and he may have some light to shed on the uncanny affair.

Expect 1st volume, Voices from the Shadow, to be ready from the binder next month. The proofs looked great.

Best
— Scotty

The following week brought a letter postmarked Pelham, Massachusetts:

A mutual friend, Prescott Brandon, forwarded your fascinating account of discovering curious sticks and stone artifacts on an abandoned farm in upstate New York. I found this most intriguing, and wonder if you recall further details? Can you relocate the exact site after thirty years? If possible, I'd like to examine the foundations this spring, as they call to mind similar megalithic sites of this region. Several of us are interested in locating what we believe are remains of megalithic construction dating back to the Bronze Age, and to determine their possible use in rituals of black magic in colonial days.

Present archaeological evidence indicates that ca. 1700–2000 BC there was an influx of Bronze Age peoples into the Northeast from Europe. We know that the Bronze Age saw the rise of an extremely advanced culture, and that as seafarers they were to have no peers until the Vikings. Remains of a megalithic culture originating in the Mediterranean can be seen in the Lion Gate in Mycenae, in Stonehenge, and in dolmens, passage graves, and barrow mounds throughout Europe. Moreover, this seems to have represented far more than a style of architecture peculiar to

the era. Rather, it appears to have been a religious cult whose adherents worshipped a sort of earth-mother, served her with fertility rituals and sacrifices, and believed that immortality of the soul could be secured through interment in megalithic tombs.

That this culture came to America cannot be doubted from the hundreds of megalithic remnants found—and now recognized—in our region. The most important site to date is Mystery Hill in N.H., comprising a great many walls and dolmens of megalithic construction—most notably the Y Cavern barrow mound and the Sacrificial Table (see postcard). Less spectacular megalithic sites include the group of cairns and carved stones at Mineral Mt., subterranean chambers with stone passageways such as at Petersham and Shutesbury, and uncounted shaped megaliths and buried "monk's cells" throughout this region.

Of further interest, these sites seem to have retained their mystic aura for the early colonials, and numerous megalithic sites show evidence of having been used for sinister purposes by colonial sorcerers and alchemists. This became particularly true after the witchcraft persecutions drove many practitioners into the western wilderness— explaining why upstate New York and western Mass have seen the emergence of so many cultist groups in later years.

Of particular interest here is Shadrach Ireland's "Brethren of the New Light," who believed that the world was soon to be destroyed by sinister "Powers from Outside" and that they, the elect, would then attain physical immortality. The elect who died beforehand were to have their bodies preserved on tables of stone until the "Old Ones" came forth to return them to life. We have definitely linked the megalithic sites at Shutesbury to later unwholesome practices of the New Light cult. They were absorbed in 1781 by Mother Ann Lee's Shakers, and Ireland's putrescent corpse was hauled from the

stone table in his cellar and buried.

Thus I think it probable that your farmhouse may have figured in similar hidden practices. At Mystery Hill a farmhouse was built in 1826 that incorporated one dolmen in its foundations. The house burned down ca. 1848–55, and there were some unsavory local stories as to what took place there. My guess is that your farmhouse had been built over or incorporated a similar megalithic site—and that your "sticks" indicate some unknown cult still survived there. I can recall certain vague references to lattice devices figuring in secret ceremonies, but can pinpoint nothing definite. Possibly they represent a development of occult symbols to be used in certain conjurations, but this is just a guess. I suggest you consult Waite's Ceremonial Magic or such to see if you can recognize similar magical symbols.

Hope this is of some use to you. Please let me hear back.

Sincerely,
—Alexander Stefroi

There was a postcard enclosed—a photograph of a four-and-a-half-ton granite slab, ringed by a deep groove with a spout, identified as the "Sacrificial Table at Mystery Hill." On the back Stefroi had written:

You must have found something similar to this. They are not rare— we have one in Pelham removed from a site now beneath Quabbin Reservoir. They were used for sacrifice—animal and human—and the groove is to channel blood into a bowl, presumably.

Leverett dropped the card and shuddered. Stefroi's letter reawakened the old horror, and he wished now he had let the matter lie forgotten in his files. Of course, it couldn't be forgotten —even after thirty years.

He wrote Stefroi a careful letter, thanking him for his information and adding a few minor details to his account. This spring, he promised, wondering if he would keep that promise, he would try to relocate the farmhouse on Mann Brook.

V

SPRING WAS LATE that year, and it was not until early June that Colin Leverett found time to return to Mann Brook. On the surface, very little had changed in three decades. The ancient stone bridge yet stood, nor had the country lane been paved. Leverett wondered whether anyone had driven past since his terror-sped flight.

He found the old railroad grade easily as he started downstream. Thirty years, he told himself—but the chill inside him only tightened. The going was far more difficult than before. The day was unbearably hot and humid. Wading through the rank underbrush raised clouds of black flies that savagely bit him.

Evidently the stream had seen severe flooding in the past years, judging from piled logs and debris that blocked his path. Stretches were scooped out to barren rocks and gravel. Elsewhere gigantic barriers of uprooted trees and debris looked like ancient and moldering fortifications. As he worked his way down the valley, he realized that his search would yield nothing. So intense had been the force of the long-ago flood that even the course of the stream had changed. Many of the drywall culverts no longer spanned the brook, but sat lost and alone far back from its present banks. Others had been knocked flat and swept away, or were buried beneath tons of rotting logs.

At one point Leverett found remnants of an apple orchard groping through weeds and bushes. He thought that the house must be close by, but here the flooding had been particularly

severe, and evidently even those ponderous stone foundations had been toppled over and buried beneath debris.

Leverett finally turned back to his car. His step was lighter.

A few weeks later he received a response from Stefroi to his reported failure:

Forgive my tardy reply to your letter of 13 June. I have recently been pursuing inquiries which may, I hope, lead to the discovery of a previously unreported megalithic site of major significance. Naturally I am disappointed that no traces remained of the Mann Brook site. While I tried not to get my hopes up, it did seem likely that the foundations would have survived. In searching through regional data, I note that there were particularly severe flash floods in the Otselic area in July 1942 and again in May 1946. Very probably your old farmhouse with its enigmatic devices was utterly destroyed not very long after your discovery of the site. This is weird and wild country, and doubtless there is much we shall never know.

I write this with a profound sense of personal loss over the death two nights ago of Prescott Brandon. This was a severe blow to me—as I am sure it was to you and to all who knew him. I only hope the police will catch the vicious killers who did this senseless act—evidently thieves surprised while ransacking his office. Police believe the killers were high on drugs from the mindless brutality of their crime.

I had just received a copy of the third Allard volume, Unhallowed Places. A superbly designed book, and this tragedy becomes all the more insuperable with the realization that Scotty will give the world no more such treasures.

In Sorrow,

—Alexander Stefroi

Leverett stared at the letter in shock. He had not received news of Brandon's death—had only a few days before opened a parcel from the publisher containing a first copy of *Unhallowed Places*. A line in Brandon's last letter recurred to him—a line that seemed amusing to him at the time:

> *Your sticks have bewildered a good many fans, Colin, and I've worn out a ribbon answering inquiries. One fellow in particular—a Major George Leonard—has pressed me for details, and I'm afraid that I told him too much. He has written several times for your address, but knowing how you value your privacy I told him simply to permit me to forward any correspondence. He wants to see your original sketches, I gather, but these overbearing occult types give me a pain. Frankly, I wouldn't care to meet the man myself.*

VI

"MR. COLIN LEVERETT?"

Leverett studied the tall, lean man who stood smiling at the doorway of his studio. The sports car he had driven up in was black and looked expensive. The same held for the turtleneck and leather slacks he wore, and the sleek briefcase he carried. The blackness made his thin face deathly pale. Leverett guessed his age to be late forty by the thinning of his hair. Dark glasses hid his eyes, black driving gloves his hands.

"Scotty Brandon told me where to find you," the stranger said.

"Scotty?" Leverett's voice was wary.

"Yes, we lost a mutual friend, I regret to say. I'd been talking with him just before . . . . But I see by your expression that Scotty never had time to write."

He fumbled awkwardly. "I'm Dana Allard."

"Allard?"

His visitor seemed embarrassed. “Yes—H. Kenneth Allard was my uncle.”

“I hadn’t realized Allard left a family,” mused Leverett, shaking the extended hand. He had never met the writer personally, but there was a strong resemblance to the few photographs he had seen. And Scotty had been paying royalty checks to an estate of some sort, he recalled.

“My father was Kent’s half-brother. He later took his father’s name, but there was no marriage, if you follow.”

“Of course.” Leverett was abashed. “Please find a place to sit down. And what brings you here?”

Dana Allard tapped his briefcase. “Something I’d been discussing with Scotty. Just recently I turned up a stack of my uncle’s unpublished manuscripts.” He unlatched the briefcase and handed Leverett a sheaf of yellowed paper. “Father collected Kent’s personal effects from the state hospital as next of kin. He never thought much of my uncle, or his writing. He stuffed this away in our attic and forgot about it. Scotty was quite excited when I told him of my discovery.”

Leverett was glancing through the manuscript—page on page of cramped handwriting, with revisions pieced throughout like an indecipherable puzzle. He had seen photographs of Allard manuscripts. There was no mistaking this.

Or the prose. Leverett read a few passages with rapt absorption. It was authentic—and brilliant.

“Uncle’s mind seems to have taken an especially morbid turn as his illness drew on,” Dana hazarded. “I admire his work very greatly but I find these last few pieces . . . well, a bit *too* horrible. Especially his translation of his mythical *Book of Elders*.”

It appealed to Leverett perfectly. He barely noticed his guest as he pored over the brittle pages. Allard was describing a megalithic structure his doomed narrator had encountered in the crypts beneath an ancient churchyard. There were references to “elder glyphics” that resembled his lattice devices.

"Look here," pointed Dana. "These incantations he records here from Alorri-Zrokros's forbidden tome: 'Yogth-Yugth-Sut-Hyrath-Yogng'— Hell, I can't pronounce them. And he has pages of them."

"This is incredible!" Leverett protested. He tried to mouth the alien syllables. It could be done. He even detected a rhythm.

"Well, I'm relieved that you approve. I'd feared these last few stories and fragments might prove a little too much for Kent's fans."

"Then you're going to have them published?"

Dana nodded. "Scotty was going to. I just hope those thieves weren't searching for this—a collector would pay a fortune. But Scotty said he was going to keep this secret until he was ready for an announcement." His thin face was sad.

"So now I'm going to publish it myself—in a deluxe edition. And I want you to illustrate it."

"I'd feel honored!" vowed Leverett, unable to believe it.

"I really liked those drawings you did for the trilogy. I'd like to see more like those—as many as you feel like doing. I mean to spare no expense in publishing this. And those stick things . . ."

"Yes?"

"Scotty told me the story on those. Fascinating! And you have a whole notebook of them? May I see it?"

Leverett hurriedly dug the notebook from his file, returned to the manuscript.

Dana paged through the book in awe. "These things are totally bizarre—and there are references to such things in the manuscript, to make it even more fantastic. Can you reproduce them all for the book?"

"All I can remember," Leverett assured him. "And I have a good memory. But won't that be overdoing it?"

"Not at all! They fit into the book. And they're utterly unique. No, put everything you've got into this book. I'm going to entitle it *Dwellers in the Earth*, after the longest piece. I've already arranged for its printing, so we begin as soon as you can have the art ready.

And I know you'll give it your all."

VII

HE WAS FLOATING in space. Objects drifted past him. Stars, he first thought. The objects drifted closer.

Sticks. Stick lattices of all configurations. And then he was drifting among them, and he saw that they were not sticks—not of wood. The lattice designs were of dead-pale substance, like streaks of frozen starlight. They reminded him of glyphics of some unearthly alphabet—complex, enigmatic symbols arranged to spell . . . what? And there *was* an arrangement—a three-dimensional pattern. A maze of utterly baffling intricacy . . .

Then somehow he was in a tunnel. A cramped, stone-lined tunnel through which he must crawl on his belly. The dank, moss-slimed stones pressed close about his wriggling form, evoking shrill whispers of claustrophobic dread.

And after an indefinite space of crawling through this and other stone-lined burrows, and sometimes through passages whose angles hurt his eyes, he would creep forth into a subterranean chamber. Great slabs of granite a dozen feet across formed the walls and ceiling of this buried chamber, and between the slabs other burrows pierced the earth. Altar-like, a gigantic slab of gneiss waited in the center of the chamber. A spring welled darkly between the stone pillars that supported the table. Its outer edge was encircled by a groove, sickeningly stained by the substance that clotted in the stone bowl beneath its collecting spout.

Others were emerging from the darkened burrows that ringed the chamber—slouched figures only dimly glimpsed and vaguely human. And a figure in a tattered cloak came toward him from the shadow— stretched out a clawlike hand to seize his wrist and draw him toward the sacrificial table. He followed unresistingly,

knowing that something was expected of him.

They reached the altar, and in the glow from the cuneiform lattices chiseled into the gneiss slab, he could see the guide's face. A moldering corpse-face, the rotted bone of its forehead smashed inward upon the foulness that oozed forth . . .

And Leverett would awaken to the echo of his screams . . .

He'd been working too hard, he told himself, stumbling about in the darkness, getting dressed because he was too shaken to return to sleep. The nightmares had been coming every night. No wonder he was exhausted.

But in his studio his work awaited him. Almost fifty drawings finished now, and he planned another score. No wonder the nightmares.

It was a grueling pace, but Dana Allard was ecstatic with the work he had done. And *Dwellers in the Earth* was waiting. Despite problems with typesetting, with getting the special paper Dana wanted—the book only waited on him.

Though his bones ached with fatigue, Leverett determinedly trudged through the graying night. Certain features of the nightmare would be interesting to portray.

VIII

THE LAST OF the drawings had gone off to Dana Allard in Petersham, and Leverett, fifteen pounds lighter and gut-weary, converted part of the bonus check into a case of good whiskey. Dana had the offset presses rolling as soon as the plates were shot from the drawings. Despite his precise planning, presses had broken down, one printer quit for reasons not stated, there had been a bad accident at the new printer—seemingly innumerable problems, and Dana had been furious at each delay. But the production pushed along quickly for all that. Leverett wrote that

the book was cursed, but Dana responded that a week would see it ready.

Leverett amused himself in his studio constructing stick lattices and trying to catch up on his sleep. He was expecting a copy of the book when he received a letter from Stefroi:

> *Have tried to reach you by phone last few days, but no answer at your house. I'm pushed for time just now, so must be brief. I have indeed uncovered an unsuspected megalithic site of enormous importance. It's located on the estate of a long-prominent Mass. family—and as I cannot receive authorization to visit it, I will not say where. Have investigated secretly (and quite illegally) for a short time one night and was nearly caught. Came across reference to the place in collection of 17th century letters and papers in a divinity school library. Writer denouncing the family as a brood of sorcerers and witches, references to alchemical activities and other less savory rumors—and describes underground stone chambers, megalithic artifacts, etc., which are put to "foul usage and diabolic praktise." Just got a quick glimpse but his description was not exaggerated. And Colin—in creeping through the woods to get to the site, I came across dozens of your mysterious "sticks!" Brought a small one back and have it here to show you. Recently constructed and exactly like your drawings. With luck, I'll gain admittance and find out their significance—undoubtedly they have significance—though these cultists can be stubborn about sharing their secrets. Will explain my interest is scientific, no exposure to ridicule—and see what they say. Will get a closer look one way or another. And so—I'm off!*
>
> *Sincerely,*
> *—Alexander Stefroi*

Leverett's bushy brows rose. Allard had intimated certain dark

rituals in which the stick lattices figured. But Allard had written over thirty years ago, and Leverett assumed the writer had stumbled onto something similar to the Mann Brook site. Stefroi was writing about something current.

He rather hoped Stefroi would discover nothing more than an inane hoax.

THE NIGHTMARES HAUNTED him still—familiar now, for all that the scenes and phantasms were visited by him only in dream. Familiar. The terror that they evoked was undiminished.

Now he was walking through forest—a section of hills that seemed to be close by. A huge slab of granite had been dragged aside, and a pit yawned where it had lain. He entered the pit without hesitation, and the rounded steps that led downward were known to his tread. A buried stone chamber, and leading from it stone-lined burrows. He knew which one to crawl into.

And again the underground room with its sacrificial altar and its dark spring beneath, and the gathering circle of poorly glimpsed figures. A knot of them clustered about the stone table, and as he stepped toward them he saw they pinned a frantically writhing man.

It was a stoutly built man, white hair disheveled, flesh gouged and filthy. Recognition seemed to burst over the contorted features, and he wondered if he should know the man. But now the lich with the caved-in skull was whispering in his ear, and he tried not to think of the unclean things that peered from that cloven brow, and instead took the bronze knife from the skeletal hand, and raised the knife high, and because he could not scream and awaken, did with the knife as the tattered priest had whispered . . .

And when after an interval of unholy madness, he at last did awaken, the stickiness that covered him was not cold sweat, nor was it nightmare the half-devoured heart he clutched in one fist.

IX

LEVERETT SOMEHOW FOUND sanity enough to dispose of the shredded lump of flesh. He stood under the shower all morning, scrubbing his skin raw. He wished he could vomit.

There was a news item on the radio. The crushed body of noted archaeologist, Dr. Alexander Stefroi, had been discovered beneath a fallen granite slab near Whately. Police speculated the gigantic slab had shifted with the scientist's excavations at its base. Identification was made through personal effects.

When his hands stopped shaking enough to drive, Leverett fled to Petersham—reaching Dana Allard's old stone house about dark. Allard was slow to answer his frantic knock.

"Why, good evening, Colin! What a coincidence your coming here just now! The books are ready. The bindery just delivered them."

Leverett brushed past him. "We've got to destroy them!" he blurted. He'd thought a lot since morning.

"Destroy them?"

"There's something none of us figured on. Those stick lattices—there's a cult, some damnable cult. The lattices have some significance in their rituals. Stefroi hinted once they might be glyphics of some sort, I don't know. But the cult is still alive. They killed Scott . . . they killed Stefroi. They're on to me—I don't know what they intend. They'll kill you to stop you from releasing this book!"

Dana's frown was worried, but Leverett knew he hadn't impressed him the right way. "Colin, this sounds insane. You really have been overextending yourself, you know. Look, I'll show you the books. They're in the cellar."

Leverett let his host lead him downstairs. The cellar was quite large, flagstoned and dry. A mountain of brown-wrapped bundles awaited them.

"Put them down here where they wouldn't knock the floor

out," Dana explained. "They start going out to distributors tomorrow. Here, I'll sign your copy."

Distractedly Leverett opened a copy of *Dwellers in the Earth*. He gazed at his lovingly rendered drawings of rotting creatures and buried stone chambers and stained altars—and everywhere the enigmatic latticework structures. He shuddered.

"Here." Dana Allard handed Leverett the book he had signed. "And to answer your question, they *are* elder glyphics."

But Leverett was staring at the inscription in its unmistakable handwriting:

> *For Colin Leverett, Without whom this work could not have seen completion.*
>
> *—H. Kenneth Allard.*

Allard was speaking. Leverett saw places where the hastily applied flesh-toned makeup didn't quite conceal what lay beneath. "Glyphics symbolic of alien dimensions—inexplicable to the human mind, but essential fragments of an evocation so unthinkably vast that the 'pentagram' (if you will) is miles across. Once before we tried—but your iron weapon destroyed part of Althol's brain. He erred at the last instant— almost annihilating us all. Althol had been formulating the evocation since he fled the advance of iron four millennia past.

"Then you reappeared, Colin Leverett—you with your artist's knowledge and diagrams of Althol's symbols. And now a thousand new minds will read the evocation you have returned to us, unite with our minds as we stand in the Hidden Places. And the Great Old Ones will come forth from the earth, and we, the dead who have steadfastly served them, shall be masters of the living."

Leverett turned to run, but now they were creeping forth from the shadows of the cellar, as massive flagstones slid back to reveal the tunnels beyond. He began to scream as Althol came to lead him away, but he could not awaken, could only follow.

AFTERWORD

SOME READERS MAY note certain similarities between characters and events in this story and the careers of real-life figures, well known to fans of this genre. This was unavoidable, and no disrespect is intended. For much of this story *did* happen, though I suppose you've heard that one before.

In working with Lee Brown Coye on Manly Wade Wellman's *Worse Things Waiting*, I finally asked him why his drawings so frequently included sticks in their design. Lee's work is well known to me, but I had noticed that the "sticks" only began to appear in his work for Ziff-Davis in the early sixties. Lee finally sent me a folder of clippings and letters, far more eerie than this story—and factual.

In 1938 Coye *did* come across a stick-ridden farmhouse in the desolate Mann Brook region. He kept this to himself until fall of 1962, when John Vetter passed the account to August Derleth and to antiquarian archaeologist Andrew E. Rothovius. Derleth intended to write Coye's adventure as a Lovecraft novelette, but never did so. Rothovius discussed the site's possible megalithic significance with Coye in a series of letters and journal articles on which I have barely touched. In June 1963 Coye returned to the Mann Brook site and found it obliterated. It is a strange region, as H. P. Lovecraft knew.

Coye's fascinating presentation of their letters appeared in five weekly installments of his "Chips and Shavings" column in the *Mid York Weekly* from 22 August to 26 September, 1963. Rothovius, whose research into the New England megaliths has been published in many journals, wrote an excellent and disquieting summary of his research in Arkham House's *The Dark Brotherhood*, to which the reader is referred.

GRAVEDIRT MOUTH

MAURA MCHUGH

Maura McHugh lives in Galway, Ireland, and has written three collections: *Twisted Fairy Tales*, *Twisted Myths*, and, more recently, *The Boughs Withered (When I Told Them My Dreams)*. Her science fiction rom-com radio play, *The Love of Small Appliances*, was broadcast in June 2019 and is available online. She's written comic books for Dark Horse, IDW, and *2000 AD*, and her monograph about David Lynch's iconic film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, was nominated for a British Fantasy Award for Best Non-Fiction.

"I've always been a fan of what is now referred to as 'folk horror,'" reveals the author. "This story evolved while I was pondering a good subject for this anthology, and the eerie Irish ballad 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave' came to mind. I've loved it since I heard Dead Can Dance sing it, although I must recommend the original recorded version by Irish trad band Scullion from 1979 (a very folk horror era).

"It's based on an anonymous seventeenth-century Irish poem titled 'Táim sínte ar do thuama,' and the translation by Frank O'Connor is the best known. I examined the Irish and the English versions of it carefully, and listened

to different recordings. As it played on repeat through my headphones, I jotted down some ideas, which eventually resolved into the words ‘Gravedirt Mouth.’ From that, the story flowed.”

> “We’ll fill your mouth with gravedirt, girl
> For your eyes have damned us to gaol.”
> *—from “Gravedirt Mouth,” a traditional folk song*

I HEARD THE story during a Girl Scouts camp, as we sat around a resentful fire while overhead a sickle moon savaged the dregs of storm clouds. It had been a wet, ugly day and it was only with the advent of twilight—very late as is typical with an Irish summer—that the torrential rain let up.

In my memory we were a small patrol of damp and crabby teens, and our leader, Augusta Wright, had lost her patience with us around our third drowning sung to the tune of our incessant moaning.

Augusta was probably in her forties—ancient to our eyes—with a rope of silver-shot braided hair, and a no-nonsense attitude. She didn’t coddle, and reserved her warmth for when it was truly needed.

When Molly piped up with “Tell us a ghost story, Augusta,” I noticed the flames glint in Augusta’s eyes. She squinted at Molly, and then the rest of us, assessing us, and tilted her head as if searching for something appropriate, or listening for a signal.

She nodded curtly. “Here’s one my late grandfather told me.” Her delivery of the word *grandfather* sounded like he was someone she wanted to kick.

I licked the remnants of charred marshmallow off my fingers, and settled myself on my folded-up groundsheet. Despite that protective layer, and my waterproof trousers, the dank from the saturated grass seeped into my bones. Nearby, the tree branches rattled in a breeze and called for attention.

“This was back in the bad old days,” she began, long stick in hand, which she used to poke at the furnace-heart of the fire. It issued a small roar and spit out sparks. “You know, no electricity, no Internet, no entertainment except what you could make with instruments or gossip, and the resentment of having to pay the English landlord for quarter of an acre of bog and being expected to doff your cap at him as you handed it over.”

I cast a sideways glance at Molly, who was the girl I knew the best, which wasn’t much. I was new to our small town and my mother had forced me to join the tiny Scouts group to make friends. Molly was bundled up in a fleece and staring at Augusta across the fire, her forehead creased a little, the way she got when she was trying to figure something out. Which is how she looked at me, mostly.

Augusta continued. “This story concerns a girl called Nora. She was about your age and had an unearthly voice. Plus, she was a little strange. She preferred to wander in the woods and sing to the birds and the animals rather than for people. Her parents had ten other children, so they couldn’t watch what all of them were doing after they reached a certain age. Of course, the local priest heard all about it from the usual busy-bodies. Stories began. That she was singing for the Other Crowd, at their special revelries in the forest.”

Augusta must have noticed a few perplexed expressions for she paused. “Back then you never directly referred to them as the *Sidhe*, and especially not as the f-word, which they despised.”

Lauren piped up. Of course, it was Lauren. She was a know-it-all. “What, you mean fairies?”

At that very moment a vixen screeched in the woods. Molly jumped, and leaned a bit closer to me. I didn’t mind.

“Now you’ve done it, Lauren,” I said. “They’ll be haunting you tonight.”

We all laughed, including Augusta, who often suffered through Lauren’s endless questions. Lauren flashed scarlet and shrank into

her jacket, wounded, and perhaps a little scared by the implication.

August took a sip from her hip flask and returned to her tale. "The priest noted to Nora's parents that she was old enough to marry, and suggested a brood of children would keep her too busy to sing, so the matchmaker was summoned. There were few candidates. Her family was poor and couldn't afford a dowry. They were considering packing her off to a convent when an older bachelor named Henry, the gamekeeper for the lord's big estate, came forward. The forest was part of the property, and he'd heard the girl's singing on many occasions."

Jess, the tiniest of us, leaned forward and interrupted. "How old was he?"

Augusta shrugged. "Thirty, maybe even forty. The story doesn't say."

We cried, "*Ew!*" as one.

August rolled her eyes at our pantomime of revulsion and kept going.

"They were married and she moved into his lodge by the woods. They were both loners and fitted very well together. Nora grew vegetables and tended to their chickens, pigs, and goat while her husband watched over the game for the estate—rabbits, pheasants, deer, snipe, and woodcock. He often spent nights guarding the lord's land against poachers, and she'd bring him supper in a basket sometimes. She wasn't afraid of the dark and understood the rhythms of nature.

"The locals had a contrary attitude toward Henry: he was both a good neighbor and a person employed to keep food from their mouths. And when crops were scarce, his job brought him into conflict with everyone.

"One night he caught a boy poaching rabbits, and the lad was sentenced to deportation to Australia. The grieving family blamed Henry, and were determined to have revenge. They ambushed him one night, intending to beat him badly as a warning. But they'd

been drinking, and their rage ran hot. They cracked his skull open like an egg. Nora, on her way to meet Henry, witnessed the murder."

The fire popped and we all startled. None of us laughed or said a word, eager to hear Nora's fate.

"At first no one knew what she'd seen, because her profound grief was taken as a sign of her mourning. She neglected everything. She lingered by her husband's grave, day and night, singing to him in her disquieting voice. This was tolerated initially, but after a while people could not stand to look at her, gaunt in her dress wet with dirt, with dead leaves straggled in her hair. As it went on her songs became stranger and told the story of the death of a stag by hunters. Eventually, people guessed that she'd seen her husband's killers, and those responsible realized they had a serious problem.

"They came for her one moonless night, flitting through the yew trees in the cemetery as she chanted to her husband under the ground. They strangled her and filled her mouth with dirt. So she could tell no tales and sing no more songs.

"The next morning she was discovered laid out on her husband's grave. A circle of antlers crowned her head and birds' feathers were spread out like wings from her shoulders. Her eyes were missing. Her bloody sockets tracked red tears down her cheeks.

"It is said that the *Sidhe* did this as their tribute to her services over the years, and they gave her a new duty—to sense the vulnerable and hunt the wicked."

Augusta paused. Sparks drifted up toward the black sky speckled with stars and stabbed with a sharp-white crescent. A breeze swept a hail of water off the listening trees. In this open fire-lit circle, in the boundless wild, the uncanny seemed possible.

"In the following months, half the killers' families perished in peculiar accidents, and the rest of them took boats to foreign lands, hoping to outrun Gravedirt Mouth. None of them escaped

her dark perception. She would travel any distance to serve her justice.

"They say you hear her song first—high-pitched and lilting. After the first notes you cannot move. And she will come to you, gliding in her dirt-clogged shroud, her lips stopped open with soil, her wings outstretched, and her fingers tipped with talons. If the fear doesn't stop your heart, her claws and tines will pierce your soul.

"Then you become part of her phantom troop for eternity, singing laments and wishing you had lived a better life."

For several minutes none of us could speak. Augusta stared into the flames, but I thought there was a look of satisfaction on her face. The prospect of spending a night outdoors in this lonely place, with only a layer of canvas between me and the night's spirits, was both thrilling and terrifying.

August stood and zipped up her jacket. "Time for bed, girls," she said.

We were subdued and kept close as we prepared for a night in the big tent. We settled into our sleeping bags and turned off our flashlights. For a while we lay there listening to each other's breaths, which mirrored the movements and creaking of the tent's fabric.

"Do you think she's out there?" Molly asked in a cracked voice.

"Gravedirt Mouth?" I asked.

I sensed Lauren sit up. "Don't say that name!" she warned. Her voice thrummed with worry.

Jess was the least concerned. In her petite frame beat the heart of a pragmatic lion. "It's just a story. It feels scarier because we're camping. Away from everyone. Near the forest. And there's crappy phone reception. So we can't call for help." At this point I suspected Jess was goading Lauren.

I laughed, to cover up twinges of fear. "I've seen this movie," I said. "We all die in it."

And that sentence invoked a heavy atmosphere.

Lauren turned her flashlight on, and its beam cast her appalled face into sharp shadows. “Why would you say that?” she hissed.

Jess added, “Actually, at least one of us has to survive.”

“And we all know who’d that be,” I said.

As one we chorused, “Lauren!”

“Shut up!” she said, but I think she was secretly pleased. She lay back and clicked off her flashlight.

“We’ll wake up Augusta with this carry-on,” I said.

“What’s she like telling us that yarn?” Jess said, yawned, and wiggled in her soft cocoon.

I yawned too. “Molly asked for it.”

“I’d heard . . . something about it,” she admitted reluctantly.

“You knew the story already?” I was surprised. Molly didn’t strike me as the morbid type.

“Kinda. Not all those details.”

Our conversation petered out as tiredness overtook us. Jess fell asleep first, snoring lightly.

I lay still for a long time, yearning for sleep, listening to the gentle susurrations of my friends . . . they were becoming friends. That was as scary as an avenging monster. Nothing could cut as sharply as betrayal.

Time became fuzzy. I dozed and woke suddenly, completely, as if freezing water had been flung in my face.

I couldn’t move my body, and my heart thumped a rave beat.

From my peripheral vision I spotted Molly slipping through the tent’s flap. She turned on her flashlight, and her silhouette moved toward the woods until it faded into the darkness.

Gradually, I regained the ability to move. I sat up, whooshing in relieved breaths. This had happened before. Sleep paralysis, the doctor told me when my mother insisted I report it during our next visit. I’d made a pact with her, after my incident, to be forthcoming about any problems. This one could be solved with better sleep, apparently. My insomnia and I had a good laugh.

I waited for Molly to return, thinking she’d gone out to pee.

Lauren and Jess slept deeply, hardly moving. Jess laughed at a dream joke. Lauren farted. Eventually, concern niggled at me.

Too awake to drift off, I decided to make sure Molly was all right.

I unzipped my sleeping bag, pretending I was moving in slow-motion. The metal teeth-unlocking was alien and loud in the hushed space. I rolled quietly, snagged my thick waterproof jacket, glad for its soft lining and my thermal PJs, and slid my LED flashlight into a pocket. Tiptoeing, I felt like a cartoon character and nearly exploded with laughter. I muffled my sniggers. My boots waited by the opening, and I clambered into them and almost toppled over.

Outside, the cool air washed over me with abandon, catching my fine hair and splaying it over my face. I inhaled the weighty tones of wet soil and decay, and the brighter perfumes of grass, flowers, and pine needles. My eyes adjusted to the darkness and I could make out our campsite, Augusta's tent, and the blocky shape of the Range Rover that had transported us to this site. Gray clouds hugged the horizon but didn't hinder the splendor of the night sky, glimmering with stars, the light eons old and yet able to burst the heart of a blasé, teenaged girl.

I remained rooted with awe until a *crack* broke my trance. It wasn't loud, but carried in the quiet. I clicked my flashlight on to a dim setting, and moved toward the sound, stepping carefully. A path curved into the black tree line and I followed it until I was bounded on either side by tall trees, swaying like somnambulists. The space was alive with noise. Creaking and a low grousing breeze. A hoot. Erratic high-pitched squeaking. I was on high alert, and each new element pushed up my heartbeat. I felt the sudden need to piss, but ignored it long enough for the urgency to pass.

I crouched as I moved forward because I sensed something else occupied the woods. The atmosphere thickened and I slowed. A murmur. I flicked off my flashlight and slid it into my pocket.

I waited patiently, allowing my eyes to settle into a deeper

seeing. I inched forward toward a different pattern of darkness. A few more steps and stars limed the curved treetops of a clearing. The moon peel hung above it.

At its center a massive tree trunk erupted. It had been blasted, or rotted down to a harbinger of destruction.

Molly stood there, with Augusta. The older woman had a hand on Molly's shoulder and spoke to her softly. I could not hear the words, but the tone was solemn. A worm of fear squirmed in my stomach. There was something about how Augusta straightened after their low conversation. Like someone lifting a burden.

"I'm sure," Molly said, insistent.

Augusta murmured, and handed Molly an item. A blade glinted. Molly gasped and leaned forward to lay her hand upon the jagged shards of ancient bark.

She lifted her face and sang a song with an unsettling melody.

The words vanished from my memory as soon as she cried them to the heavens. The pain it evoked caused me to weep.

I dropped to my knees as if I had been punched in the belly and all breath had been knocked from my body. A terrible memory threatened to split my mind.

I landed on a pointed stone, which cut through my PJs and stabbed my flesh. I yelped, but it was lost in Molly's singing.

At first I thought the rushing sound was a gust moving through the trees, but I realized it was the collective, plaintive sobbing of hundreds of voices, pouring toward the clearing.

They surged in, a wave of shifting shapes, all of them wailing and twisting in torment. And after them a tall form, made imperious by the circle of horns pushing from her head, with a large, branching antler spiking each temple. Strips of shroud curled her arms and trailed into filthy ribbons. Long, gleaming talons *snicked* against each other as her fingers moved slowly, as if in anticipation.

Her body was wrapped in a similar fashion, and the bedraggled ends swished after her as she glided toward the woman and girl,

borne aloft by great multicolored wings that beat at an impossibly sedate rate. Her bare feet hung limp, dangling inches above the ground.

It was her face that froze my ability to move or reason—corpse-pale skin slick to the skull, orbs of darkness where eyes should reside, and stripes of red leaking from them. Her mouth was stretched wide and packed full of dirt. Her jaws moved constantly, and the tendons in her neck strained as if trying to spit out the blockage.

My throat constricted just watching her.

Augusta's shoulders were bowed, and I wasn't sure if it was in deference or in pain. Molly had collapsed to the ground, both hands bracing her so she could see the approach of the ferocious spirit.

The troop flowed into the clearing, creating a crescent wall. Each of them turned and roiled incessantly in their spot. The dread woman floated to a halt before the two. When she spoke it was with a calm, insistent voice in the mind. It could not be dampened, and it demanded honesty. And I did not know why I could hear it too.

You have summoned me. Give me a name.

Augusta helped Molly stand. Her hands trembled badly.

Molly raised her head and spoke a name.

The creature nodded.

And she turned her head to regard me. Her ominous scrutiny rooted me.

Give me a name, she instructed.

I felt the trickle of blood from the wound on my knee.

Augusta and Molly swiveled and noticed me. Recognition and horror chased across their faces.

"There is no one," I said. Images of family and friends who had harmed me in a myriad of ways flooded my memory. I had been badly hurt by several, but none of them merited the judgment she would inflict upon them, surely.

A name, she said, implacable. *I have been summoned, give me a name*.

“I don’t have one,” and I began to cry, for I realized that she would not accept that answer.

The troop turned to look at me, and in their weird chorus a new melody line swelled—one of triumphant need. They flickered in place with new fervor. Their noise battered at my defenses.

I will have a name, she said. *Or I will take you*.

Her wings beat and she moved inexorably toward me.

Augusta covered her eyes with her hands. Molly stood with arms wrapped around her chest, and she was bawling.

Who has harmed you to bring you to me?

She sailed across the clearing and I pushed myself up. Grief and guilt crashed as the scars on my body flared with remembered agony.

Her voice was a lance piercing a boil. One I hardly knew remained inside.

Layers of accreted protection covered it, so it was a blind, cancerous spot in my heart.

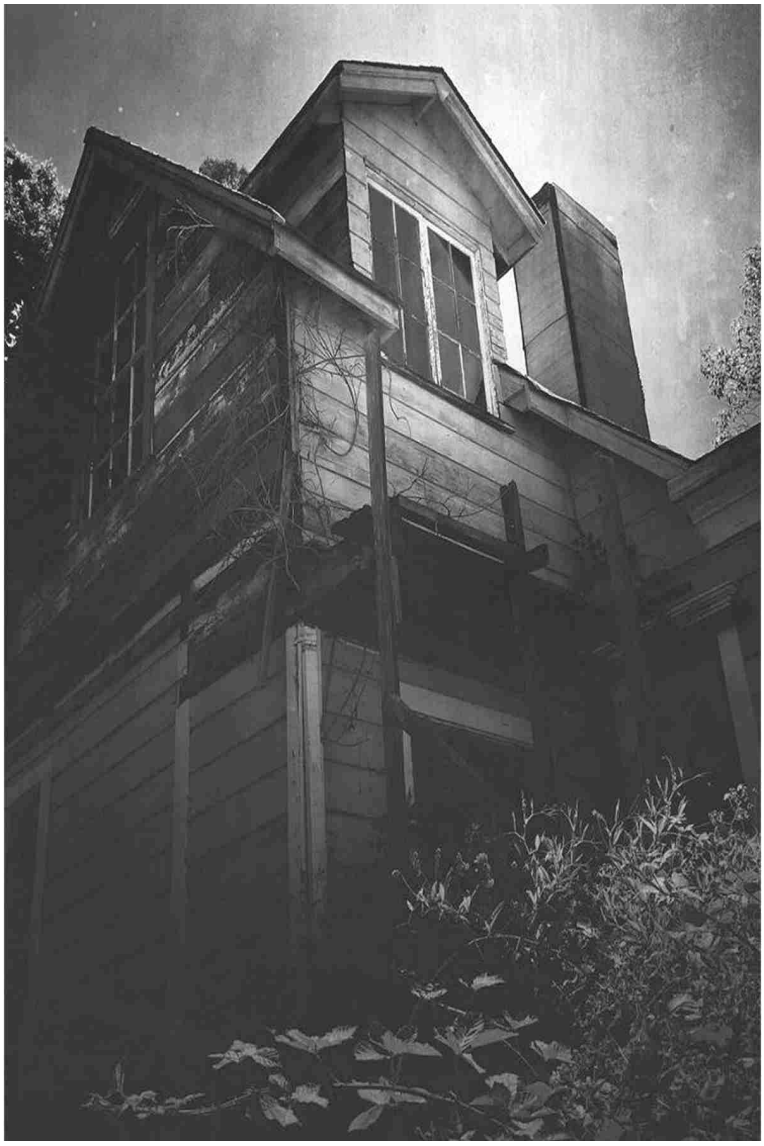
There must be a name.

Her voice, and that of her dire chorus, shattered the shell, exposing my vulnerability. The wounding of my spirit.

She moved within reach, looming above me. Her claws slid across each other. Her wings wafted air perfumed with putrefaction.

I looked up into her penetrating gaze, and in its dark knowing was the liberation of hate.

When I told her the name, I sang it, gleefully.



GAVIN'S FIELD

STEVE RASNIC TEM

Steve Rasnic Tem's latest collection is *Thanatrauma: Stories* from Valancourt Books (publisher of his selected stories volume, *Figures Unseen*). His previous collection was *The Night Doctor and Other Tales* from Centipede Press, about which the *Publishers Weekly* starred review said: "Tem treads a fine line between the weird and the horrific in these stories, and they are memorable for their subtle power and insidious eeriness." He is a past winner of the Bram Stoker, World Fantasy, and British Fantasy Awards.

"I've never lived in New England," Tem admits, "but I did grow up in one of those rural pockets of (at the time) isolated humanity in the Appalachian South. All we knew about the outside world was what Walter Cronkite told us on the evening news, and it seemed to have about as much relevance to our own lives as the latest news from Mars.

"Many of the people I knew had never ventured more than fifty miles from home. In such isolated areas, without reference to the mores of the rest of the world, strange beliefs can develop. In the case of Appalachia, it was snake handling. In the case of my fictional Disleigh Township, it's something far more disturbing."

HE REMEMBERED LITTLE of his father. He wondered if this lack of information was deliberate, and mutual. Sometimes a memory would surface and he'd be seduced into obsessive examination until he managed to bury it again.

Gavin was due to take possession of his father's estate in early November, but New England had a devastating winter that delayed the move until the following April. He'd never visited his father in Vermont, never considered living there, but he had nowhere else to go. They'd been distant since Gavin Senior left his mother, and exchanged no more than a few letters the past thirty years. As a teenager Gavin searched his mother's house for a birth certificate, adoption papers, anything to prove this cold man couldn't have been his father. At the end, neither was familiar with the man the other became. His father's death brought unexpected opportunity. He had no idea how he was supposed to feel about that. He wasn't notified of the death until well after the funeral, not that he would have attended. Although he might have obtained some satisfaction in seeing the old stranger lowered into the dirt. He wasn't informed of the cause of death, nor did he care to inquire.

Gavin nursed his aging gray Toyota wagon over the fog-laden roads of New England, periodically stopping to fill the radiator and add oil, or for a break from the stench coming from the exhaust system. He loved the green stretches, broken up by a web of intricately fitted stone walls. He admired the quaint architecture, the tidiness of the close-together villages, the friendly feel of the region, hoping Disleigh Township would possess some of those same qualities.

The first and only sign for Disleigh was a small wooden plank bearing the name with an arrow, almost obscured by the bushes where the narrow lane joined the main road. The right-of-way was neglected and overgrown, with both dead and living vegetation crowding the ditch lines. A mile in he had to dodge his first dead animal—a small deer. There would be three more—two large dogs

and a cow. Each time he stopped and looked—no blood or visible injuries. Numerous trees were scarred with obscure graffiti. Some had been roughly crossed out. The distance between houses was much farther than he'd expected in this part of the country. Many appeared abandoned and overrun with brownish weeds, skeletal bushes, and dead limbs. Inside the door frame of a collapsing structure, a naked couple smeared with mud embraced. Flustered, he quickly turned his head away. He convinced himself he could not have seen this. His mouth was cracked and dry—he wished he had brought some water.

The car became unbearably stuffy, so he rolled down the window despite the vehicle's noxious smell. A loud explosion of birdsong drove him to shut it again, their raucous noise dismembered. He tried again a half hour later. This time the sounds resembled human voices, still unpleasant, but he found himself straining to understand.

An ornate metal marker announced the Disleigh town limits. More dilapidation followed, a few old buildings torn apart by dying trees, cavernous interiors suggestive of filth and corruption. No one walked the streets or appeared in windows. His father's house fronted a circular lane in the heart of town. It was much larger than he'd expected, the ashen exterior square and solid, if a bit beaten in by age and weather.

Martinson, the lawyer, waited on the narrow brick walk in front of the house across from a small park and its scatter of iron benches and maples. An elderly man in a floppy blue hat sat on one of the benches staring at the two men.

"That's Whitby. Your father called him the town watchdog. Apparently he has a good loud voice if he sees something amiss."

"These other buildings . . . I have neighbors? Some of them look empty."

"A few businesses, a few residences, a few vacant buildings. A real mix." He rattled the keys in his hand. "I was going to tell you I've got two keys for you. The silver one handles both the front

and back doors. The old red one unlocks that gate in the stone wall behind the house, the one that says 'Blackburn's Field' on it. Blackburn was the first owner. He built this house before there was even a town."

"So I have a *field*? Like a garden?"

"No, it's all forest now, like it was in the beginning. Trees so packed inside them low stone walls I don't know why they haven't pushed them over. I doubt you could walk more than a few steps before the under-growth stopped you. I wouldn't venture inside there, if I was you."

"No problem there. I've never been a nature person."

The lawyer looked up at him curiously. "Really? Well, you'll be a long way from any city here. What do you plan to do with yourself?"

The question embarrassed him because he had no answer. "Still trying to figure that out I suppose."

"Well, whatever—it's all yours, and here are the keys. Enjoy it." Martinson shuffled toward his car.

"Wait! How do I reach you if I have questions? Do you live nearby?"

The lawyer turned and sighed. "Phone number is on my card attached to your copy of the will. I live in Connecticut. I visited your father a few times here, but that's the extent of my familiarity. Some of the shops—" He gestured around the circle. "Well, the owners would know more than I do. Locals. Ask them."

Gavin forced an awkward smile. He'd never been good talking to people. "Okay. Well, can you at least tell me about the stone walls? I saw so many of them driving in."

"Oh, they're everywhere in New England. I have some near me. They even run through the forests. I have no idea why. It really makes no sense."

After the lawyer left, Gavin looked for Whitby across the street but didn't see him. *Some watchdog . . .*

THE TOWN WAS silent but for the sound of running water. It was overcast and hadn't started raining yet, but multiple rivulets trickled down the patchy grass driveway into the cobbled street. Gavin supposed it might be the last remains of melting snow, although there was no snow visible. He crouched for a better look. There was an unexpected thickness to the stream: sediment and debris, the occasional wooden splinter or twig or tightly curled black leaf, buttons and pieces of cloth, worms and dead insects, what looked like but couldn't be hair, what looked like rounded and polished slivers of bone.

He heard a meowing, turned to see a number of cats flowing down the cobbled lane in a loose sort of formation. A few of them carried shreds of some sort of skinned carcass in their mouths. One turned and stared at him boldly, a squirrel's head dangling from its jaws by a narrow band of skin.

The mist transitioned into a needlelike rain. He struggled with the lock at first, and then pushed the heavy door in on the cramped wood-paneled hall, dark with dust and grime. His heart sank at this first glimpse of filth, but he had to get his few belongings inside.

The rain increased in intensity as he struggled with the paper and plastic sacks, the floppy cardboard boxes, dumping them just past the entranceway. Halfway through he stopped and stared past the edge of the house, a large trash bag full of random clothing in his arms. There was a kind of music, one rising sharp note after another. He could see the edge of the woods a short distance behind the house, that rusted iron gate and the unreadable sign, the low walls cobbled together out of large flat stones. The tops of the trees—many of them browned and dead-looking—were bending and separating from some serious wind that somehow had not yet reached him.

The sound of laughter made him turn around. Whitby was

across the street, grinning with his hat off and waving some kind of bye-bye, rain running down his face and through his beard as if he were melting.

THE LOW-CEILINGED ENTRY led into a dank living room crowded with faded furniture, the light through the clear stained-glass windows illuminating trails of debris winding between the crappy antiques. Glass-fronted cabinets lined the walls, too dirty to see inside. A plume of visible dust preceded him into the largish dining room. Both rooms were full of dust-furred bric-a-brac that he would examine at some point, although for now he couldn't imagine touching them. The house required cleaning skills well beyond his. The estate came with some money—he hoped it was enough to hire a short-term housekeeper.

He did what he could that first day, wiped out some shelves and drawers, put clothes away, made up his bed, and cleaned the bathroom until it was tolerable. He went to bed as early as possible. He may or may not have heard more of the raucous birdcalls and discordant music, but they just as well might have been dreams.

The next morning, with no instructions for utilities, garbage pickup, or just where to buy groceries, Gavin waited until 10:00 a.m., then went out to find his neighbors.

The first few shops were closed and derelict. He came to another whose door was locked, but a bald man hunched over a desk was visible through the display window. He was busy applying labels to small bottles of dark powder. Gavin knocked on the glass and the man looked up with a smile that suddenly froze. Gavin waved, and the man stared. He knocked again and pointed toward the door. The man remained motionless. Seriously rattled, Gavin moved on.

The next building was church-like, with a cross etched into the stone near its peak. The windows by the entrance were tall, but

did not appear to be church windows. Both an open and a going out of business sign hung on the door. The elderly couple behind the counter greeted him with eager smiles.

"Hi, I need toothpaste, soap, a few essentials . . ."

"Of course. We kept, keep that sort of thing for tourists. Not that there ever were any, unfortunately." The woman led him to a row of shelves.

Gavin felt the awkward need to say something nice. "I'm sorry about your business."

"Well—businesses, even towns, have a life span. They die out when the people die out. The locals are dying at a rate we can't compete with. Even when we first opened, few bothered to venture into town. A community of hermits and recluses, I'm afraid. Who knows how many are left out there? Why, I believe you're the first new resident in ages."

"How . . ."

"That lawyer was in here, asking about the town. I told him living here only ten years made us foreigners. We used to have a successful business in New York, but we wanted to spend our last days somewhere more peaceful. A huge mistake I'm afraid. I told him if he wanted the real dirt he'd have to talk to a local, if he could find one. I guess he talked to Whitby, as useless as that was."

Gavin gathered more than he needed into a small basket. The husband provided him with a few business cards of people who would deliver groceries, haul things, clean, or perform other chores. "A dwindling selection, I'm afraid. Sometimes you call them and their number's been disconnected."

A tiny figure appeared to wave to him from a nearby shelf. It was fashioned from dried mud, tiny twisted branches, and tads of trash into somewhat of a face, something of a body. He peered closer. It had a mouth of sorts, full of dirt.

"They're all like that—a mouth full of mud, like the rest of us in the end. You can have that. Used to be a local craft. Interesting

work, but we've never sold any. They're *so* ugly. I think they give folks the creeps." Gavin smiled and pocketed it.

"You knew my father?"

The husband glanced at the wife before speaking. "He used to come in all the time to discuss the history of the house, the region. I think he asked the locals lots of questions. Then later, he didn't speak much. Alice thought he was depressed. That was around the time the town visits from locals fell to almost nothing. There were some funerals for a while. I went to one—your father was there. A sad affair. I didn't go to any more. Then we stopped hearing about the funerals altogether. But we're still strangers here—we don't hear everything."

"Oh . . . trash pickup? How do I arrange that?"

"They don't pick up the trash here. We're on our own. You could drive the twenty-five miles to the dump, or pay somebody. Most just find a place to bury it."

"Bury it? Isn't that . . . unsanitary?"

"Hah! Well, it do catch up to you I guess. Bugs and vermin and such tunneling in and out. So much around here is in the ground already. What's in the ground is a mystery until you dig it up, and we don't excavate every inch now, do we? Else, where would we stand?" He laughed a bit too loudly.

All the talk of trash and vermin made Gavin eager to get back to the house and clean. But on the way out he stopped. "One more question. All these wonderful stone walls—do you know anything about them?"

Both of them laughed. "You wouldn't think them so wonderful," the man said, "if you had to maintain one, or tear it down. Some take the walls to be fences, but they never were. In the 1800s it was all farms around here. Before that it was forest, part of that old forest that once covered everything. So they cut it all down to make their farms, thinking they'd civilized it.

"But the soil around here has rocks. Left from the glaciers, I hear. To clear a field you had to carry the rocks to the edge of

your property and stack them. Stack enough of them and you had yourself a wall. They're about thigh-high because that's about as far as an average man could lift one of them stones.

"Then come next spring you'd find even more big stones because the frost heaves them up. It happened every year. Can you imagine? Folks said the Devil put the stones in the field. I've heard that the locals, they didn't *exactly* believe in the Devil, but in something quite like him, not from the Bible, but from somewhere else.

"And after all that work the crops never thrived here, least not decent ones. This county has always been terrible for farming—whatever you plant dies quick no matter what you try. No wonder the locals quit farming and went to the cities to work in the factories. The forest came back in and swallowed up them fields, leaving the walls and the old foundations betwixt them."

GAVIN BEGAN BY sweeping up the debris covering the rugs, then vacuuming until their faded designs were plainly visible. He cleared surfaces, tossing out accumulated mail, loose reading material, papers, and any worthless bric-a-brac. He didn't think much about it—he didn't much care. It was his house now and what that dead man valued no longer mattered. He wiped off all the books and the shelves they were on. In the end he had over twenty bags of trash.

He left most of his father's wall decor in place, and the objects on the higher shelves, not because he liked any of it, but because he was reluctant to touch them: odd specimens of taxidermy—all teeth and eyes and matted fur; dozens of dried insects in various stages of development;dusty framed displays of flies, butterflies, and moths; worms and reptiles suspended in yellowing liquid; bones and wings and stretched skins; and jars full of unidentifiable organic materials—animal organs, perhaps, with disintegrated floating bits.

He wouldn't be able to live with such a collection. Was there a market for such sad things? He had no idea how to find out, and at the moment there wasn't time. For now anything he couldn't bear to look at, he draped in a sheet or newspaper.

He carried the trash bags out the back of the house and hid them there. If he did have neighbors he didn't want to offend them. It was his first good look at the backyard, a smooth field of grass leading to the gated wall and the thick woods beyond.

Now and then he thought he heard something. Whatever it was—a sound, or odd change in ear pressure—stopped him in his tracks each time. He never could figure out its nature or its origin.

Gavin worked in the kitchen the rest of the day, washing dish- and cookware, cleaning the floor and cabinets, filling several more bags of trash. When he carried them out back and set them down, a vague unease crept in, queasiness in his stomach and chest. Something was different. He gazed at the large stone sitting on top of the grass—a foot high and at least two feet across. More boulder than stone, really. He hadn't noticed it before, but it was right in the line of sight between his back door and the iron Blackburn gate.

Frost heave, the storekeeper had called it. Surely it didn't happen this quickly. He walked over and put his hand on the rough surface—so warm he jerked his hand away. Gingerly he laid his hand back down on the rock and felt a subtle vibration. He looked around—there were no other stones. He pushed against it—it was immovable.

He walked up the slight incline to the gate. The lawyer had not exaggerated—he'd never seen trees so densely packed. Up close their trunks made a giant fence with narrow gaps between. These gaps drew the eye simply because of their scarcity. There was movement between them in several spots—browns and reds and blacks gliding and blurred, animals he supposed, but nothing identifiable.

He went to the gate—it was streaked with rust and slightly

ajar, no key necessary. The hinges might be frozen. The wooden BLACKBURN'S FIELD sign was splitting and barely attached, the lettering broken and illegible.

When he touched the iron some distant sound leaked up into his body, making him clench his teeth as if electrified. Teeth bit into him, something raked his side, and he fell to the ground.

Sometime later Gavin climbed to his feet and shuffled gingerly back to the house. He looked at the stone again and was relieved to see there were no others. Back in the house he continued to clean, focusing on that single practical activity to the exclusion of everything else. He approached those filthy glass cabinets in the living room with less trepidation now, throwing them open and curiously examining the objects inside. Most of the items had been destroyed, their contents sprayed on the interior of the glass as if they'd exploded. A handful of pieces remained: tiny twisted figures of twigs and trash and mud like the one the shopkeepers had given him. Each of the figures was unique, the materials used and the twisting of them resulting in a variety of tortured poses. All had mouths of some sort, stained or filled with dark earth, straining to speak the inexpressible.

Gavin didn't retire to his upstairs bedroom until well after midnight. He opened the curtains for a final glimpse of the backyard. The clouds had blown away, leaving the grassy lot visible beneath the full moon. The stone was still there, as dark as the silhouettes of the trees. A light appeared deep within the woods, dancing and flickering, ragged like a burning torch, before going out.

DISTANT ANIMAL CRIES, growls, and a chorus of mania. Humming and panting and Gavin was awake, staring at the ceiling. Light so bright coming through the windows he imagined at first the house was on fire, and then realized it was simply the day.

Over the next few weeks he didn't venture out, concentrating

on making the house more to his liking. Using his cell phone and the cards the shopkeeper gave him, he had groceries delivered and trash hauled away, a few things repaired. Most of the phone numbers were no longer valid, and one of the handymen stopped answering his phone. After some haggling, he found a man to tow away his old automobile at a ridiculous cost. This left him without transportation, but he had nowhere to go. He supposed at some point he would need to seek employment— he would find a car then. He should have been somewhat anxious about being unemployed, but was not.

He removed the coverings from the things he hadn't wanted to see. Most of these he carried from the house, stuffed into black bags for the next trash pickup. A couple he kept as curiosities: a stuffed squirrel either attacking or fleeing, and a Christ-on-the-cross wall hanging similar in style to the small figures, with twisted vines plastered with mud for limbs, a piece of red ceramic apple for a torso. Christ's head was almost entirely mouth, a cavity smeared with black earth and illusory deep.

He carried out several old pieces of decaying furniture and placed them by the bags. If his trash-hauler wouldn't take them perhaps he could make a bonfire. At one point he stopped and surveyed his collection of refuse. Several bags and some furniture appeared to be missing. He looked around and found no other signs of disturbance. He gazed at the stone in the backyard to make sure it was still there and no others had been added.

To the left of the woods was a vista of gentle hills, tall grass, more trees in the distance, what might or might not have been structures, which might or might not have been occupied. A succession of blurry dark figures crossed his field of vision. They might have been animals— perhaps some of them were—but the shapes appeared to be too vertical, so he assumed they were human, strolling across the fields, entering the distant forest, perhaps even passing into the far side of his own walled-in woods. He presumed these were locals, the scarce Disleigh natives, going

about whatever business kept them away from the center of town.

Once things were cleaned and the furniture arranged in a manner suiting him, the trash and the discarded belongings hauled away— whether by haulers he'd hired or by folks stealing his refuse really didn't matter—Gavin was content to sit in his new home and read, or meditate, or whatever he supposed a modern-day hermit must do.

In the mornings, with the yellow light coming through the vine-veiled windows, he'd find odd insect markings and worm trails in the dust over the floorboards. There shouldn't have been much dust—he cleaned nearly every day now—but still it reappeared with some frequency. Perhaps he wasn't doing it correctly.

He supposed a house could die—he'd seen several of those on his way into town. And before they died they'd doubtless become sick. Was his house ill? He supposed so.

The next morning Gavin went out for the first time in weeks. He'd ask that nice elderly couple for advice. On the way he stood in front of the building where he'd seen the bald man working, filling his bottles with powder. Peering through the window he could see the place was now empty. Several of the empty bottles lay scattered on the floor.

The couple's shop was also dark, however, the door stripped of its going out of business sign. Of course—the shop had been close to closing, and Gavin hadn't been back in weeks.

He began to feel an uncontrollable anxiety rising up from his stomach. His hands began to flutter. He'd never experienced a panic attack—was this what one felt like? He walked to the next storefront, and the one following, the houses in between, even the structures appearing near collapse, completing the tour of the circle he'd started his first days here and never completed. Why hadn't he checked this town out more thoroughly before moving? He knocked on doors, he shouted, he jerked on every doorknob and handle. The only sounds in Disleigh were the desperate ones

he made himself.

Whitby came running around a corner, narrowly avoiding a collision. The man was wide-eyed, even crazier-looking without his hat. “Still here? Still?” he cried, jabbing Gavin’s chest with his forefinger. “Sad fool! Sad fool! Sad fool!” he brayed.

Gavin thought it some bizarre rite of self-identification and stepped back to avoid the poking finger. “Where is everyone? Have they *all* left? Are we here *alone*?”

Whitby tilted his head. “*Sad* . . . folks only come here to *die*.” He grinned and leaped off the sidewalk onto the cobbled street.

The car was a gray blur that became physical when it punched Whitby just below the hips, tossing his broken shape over the hood and bouncing it messily a good twenty feet behind. Gavin recognized his old Toyota wagon from the missing left rear hubcap and the dents on the driver’s side. He didn’t get a good look at the driver. Several people were inside the automobile, the windows full of their pale mashed faces and withered hands.

Gavin heard himself wailing for help, but once again it was the only sound in that too-quiet town. Even the noise of his escaping vehicle had been unaccountably drowned.

Knowing there would be no response he still beat on the doors and shouted, yelling until he was too hoarse to make an intelligible word. He walked back to where Whitby had been thrown. A long smear of blood had darkened the stones, but the old man’s body was nowhere to be found.

He hid in his house the rest of the day, considering if there was any way he could walk out of the town. It was so far, and seemed much too dangerous, and in any case he was too frightened to try. That night Blackburn’s Field—his field—was full of fire and distorted voices engaged in asynchronous song. Periodically he would see shadows entering and leaving the woods from its sides, and some through the gate, but the firelight created so much distortion he couldn’t be sure. The dark itself appeared to have broken down into a variety of either celebrating or suffering

shapes.

GAVIN CRAWLED OUT of bed the next morning with a crushing headache, the bitter stench of smoke permeating the house. He went around opening windows to let some fresh air in, avoiding looking outside, not ready to see what might be waiting.

He knew he should do something, call someone. He'd seen a man die right in front of him. But he had no body to show. He had convinced himself this was a dangerous place, but what real evidence did he have? Whitby's death—as terrible as it was—didn't mean he himself was in danger, but everything he felt told him he was. He had no friends he could ask to come get him. Besides, it seemed hysterical to run away from his home.

That thing Whitby said—*folks only come here to die*. Certainly Gavin hadn't come here for that. He had plenty of reasons to live—he just hadn't discovered all of them. Whenever he'd felt hopeless, he'd always told himself if he died he might miss something wonderful.

After some time he went back into the bedroom and stared out the windows at his backyard, the path to the gate, the woods—Blackburn's Field—beyond.

Threads of dark smoke floated through the blackened trees, dissipating into a grayish cloud above. The iron gate was wide open, the ground in front of it disturbed.

He lowered his eyes. The giant stone was gone. In its place several ragged cats furiously dug at the ground. One dropped a bit of bloody cadaver from its mouth as if to focus its efforts.

Without any sort of plan, Gavin bounded down the stairs and out the back door. The cats stepped aside as he marched toward the open gate. He paused to glance at where the stone had been—the ground there looked rusty and chewed. He stopped just inside the gate, this time careful not to touch any of its metal parts.

He peered into the first few feet of the woods. There were signs

of fire, but nothing severe. If anything, it had reduced the amount of undergrowth to a manageable path. Or perhaps that passage had always been there and he hadn't examined the area enough to know. Smoke had darkened the lower trunks of the trees and blackened the ground, although again, it was possible this ground had always been black.

The wooden BLACKBURN'S FIELD sign lay in pieces. Now he might rename this Gavin's Field without too much consternation from the locals, assuming there were locals left to care.

The wind picked up and blew a fine black mist around him. With it came that odd music he'd been hearing since he'd arrived in Disleigh, like birdsong blended with fragmented human voice, animal grunts and cries, a mixture that somehow sounded both like lament and desperate pleasure. And though it seemed a terrible idea to follow it, it also seemed clearly the right thing to do. He had to know the boundaries of what he'd experienced here in Disleigh, on the possibility it still might be harmless. He focused on that blackened winding path through the dense trees, and followed it.

A scorch line lay low to the ground, but only a foot or so above the vegetation thrived. Lopsided, asymmetrical flowers crowned jagged, ferocious-looking ferns. Patches of a thick, sooty fog clung above the tree roots. A few yards in, a narrow trickle of spring appeared by the path. It moved slowly, thick with rust-colored and greenish debris, as if this area of forest were bleeding.

Gavin came to a tree that appeared to have been blown apart from the inside. Beside it lay some unidentifiable corpse, too small to be human— unless it were a child—mutilated and fed upon by a shimmering blue bird. The bird flew off and the desecrated body began to move. Then Gavin realized it was the insects inside. Beyond this point animal parts were strewn over twenty or so feet of the path. Some appeared to be relatively fresh. Something crossed the path in front of him covered in insects so thoroughly there was no indication what it might be. The constant crawl of

the insects was all that was visible.

A strong wind rose again, blowing a deeper reek of burn down the path. Around him the branches warped and cried. Bits of rubbish fell from the sky. He thought these might be leaves, or clusters of twigs and seeds, but when they landed they were mostly dead birds with the occasional broken bat or large moth.

He saw several odd-looking beetles—swollen and lopsided and of a slick green. Their legs were unusually long, more like spiders' legs than any beetle's he'd ever seen. They scurried around exposed tree roots as twisty as snakes. A long gray worm crawled out from under the roots and wrapped itself around a beetle like a tiny python. The beetle struggled to escape by climbing the tree with the worm stretched out and still attached. The bark suddenly peeled from the tree and flew away. Gavin fell onto his knees. One large piece of bark was still moving. It was a moth the size of a large bird. It started to fly, then fell onto Gavin's forearm. He cried out and jumped to his feet, trying to shake it off. It shed so many scales it appeared to completely disintegrate.

Something drifted in the air between the trees, finer than dust and yet somehow more substantial. Although he couldn't have described it, Gavin found it to be breathtakingly beautiful and attempted to follow it with his eyes. That's when he first saw the people in the woods, moving quietly among the trees in their animal heads and giant insect masks, their mottled skin paint, and attached strips of fur and feathers. They passed by without bothering him, heading in the same direction as he.

In the next spread of woods he found stone rubble scattered throughout, upright blocks isolated in rows like foundation pilings, others stacked or leaning against exposed roots. He thought it might be the remains of a house or other building. But reaching them he saw that they were worn headstones, most of the names faded to illegibility. He recognized the scattered outlines of sunken graves, but most of this ancient cemetery had been obliterated by decades of natural growth. It seemed outrageous so many deaths

should leave such an insubstantial trace.

He heard them before he saw them: the grunts and the muted sufferings of human beings forced to do things against their will. At the center of the wood lay an irregular clearing of black, troubled earth. A dozen feet from its center, several men and women had been forced to their knees, their hands tied behind them. At the back of each stood one of the figures in insect or animal garb.

It took a few moments to assimilate what Gavin was seeing. All of these people were naked, the figures in masks and partial costume naked below their chests, the men and women on the ground wearing nothing at all.

It embarrassed him that he could not look away. It embarrassed him to see his adolescent shame so thoroughly portrayed. He had never been close to a nude woman, had seen few naked men. Even when taking care of his failing mother he had had a female aid to handle the intimate chores.

He'd always felt this lack of experience made him something less than a functioning adult, but he never could imagine how he might repair it.

He recognized one of the bound figures as the lawyer Martinson, who apparently never made it away from Disleigh. The man looked so incongruous, that gray-haired, distinguished-looking face, pressing his legs tightly together to conceal the mortification of his genitalia.

Martinson gazed at him desperately. Something dark and crumbling filled his mouth. With a violent retch he expelled some of it—rich and drooly gobs of dusky mud. He spat furiously. "The locals did everything, but nothing would thrive here. And so, so they *accepted* it. They *embraced* it!"

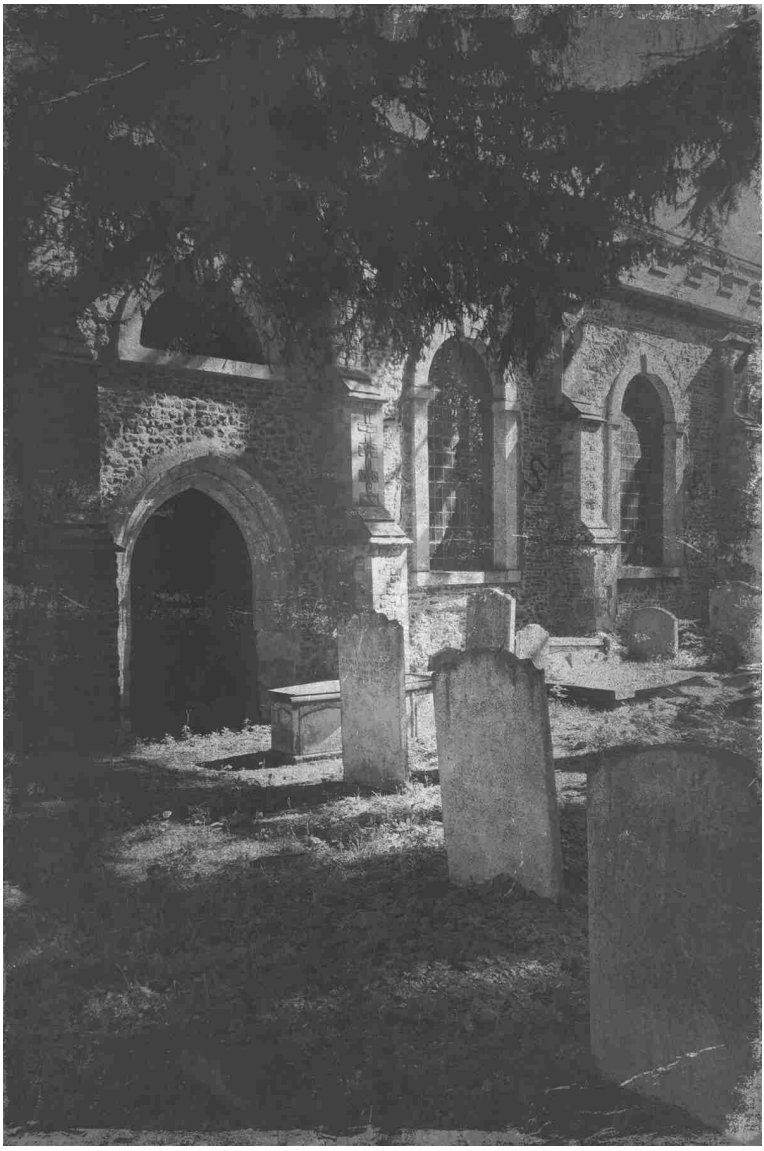
A sudden, blinding pain erased whatever else the lawyer had to say.

FROM HIS FINAL vantage point on the ground, Gavin could see most of his still-living companions, and a few whose suffering had ended. The naked lawyer lay on his side, eyes distended and mouth leaking mud. Across the circle the elderly shopkeeper and his wife kneeled, eyes closed and throats struggling to exorcise the dirt that filled them. A pitiful corpse that might have been Whitby lay closer to the center of the circle, where the black earth churned and rose and fell.

Whitby's body descended into the ground, and the ground brought up a large stone as if in replacement.

Gavin imagined this was where his father had ended, where he also soon would end. He wondered if his father's house had been a gift in atonement, or a hateful invitation to suffer a similar fate.

Gavin decided not to struggle when the man-sized insect began feeding the muck into his open mouth. It really wasn't that terrible if he let himself relax and accept what he was being offered. The taste—rich and dark and nourished with death—was not at all unfamiliar.



THE HOUND

H. P. LOVECRAFT

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937) is probably the most important and influential author of supernatural fiction of the twentieth century. A lifelong resident of Providence, Rhode Island, many of his tales are set in the fear-haunted towns of an imaginary area of Massachusetts or in the cosmic vistas that exist beyond space and time.

Since his untimely death at the age of forty-six, Lovecraft has become acknowledged as a master of fantasy fiction and a mainstream American writer second only to Edgar Allan Poe, while his relatively small body of work has influenced countless imitators and formed the basis of a worldwide industry of books, games, and movies based on his concepts.

H. P. Lovecraft's tales of the tentacled Elder God Cthulhu and his pantheon of alien deities were initially written for the pulp magazines of the 1920s and '30s. These astonishing tales blend elements of horror and science fiction and cosmic dread, and are as powerful today as they were when they initially appeared.

On September 16, 1922, Lovecraft visited the Flatbush Dutch Reformed Church in Brooklyn, New York, with his

friend Rheinhart Kleiner. As he later recalled: “Around the old pile is a hoary churchyard, with internments dating from around 1730 to the middle of the nineteenth century . . . . From one of the crumbling gravestones—dated 1747—I chipped a small piece to carry away. It lies before me as I write—and ought to suggest some sort of horror-story. I must place it beneath my pillow as I sleep . . . who can say what thing might not come out of the centuried earth to exact vengeance for his desecrated tomb? And should it come, who can say what it might not resemble?”

Lovecraft wrote “The Hound” sometime later that same month, and named one of the main characters “St. John,” after his nickname for Rheinhart Kleiner. It was finally published in the February 1924 issue of *Weird Tales* and contains the first mention of the author’s forbidden occult tome, the dreaded *Necronomicon*.

IN MY TORTURED ears there sounds unceasingly a nightmare whirring and flapping, and a faint distant baying as of some gigantic hound. It is not dream—it is not, I fear, even madness—for too much has already happened to give me these merciful doubts.

St. John is a mangled corpse; I alone know why, and such is my knowledge that I am about to blow out my brains for fear I shall be mangled in the same way. Down unlit and illimitable corridors of eldritch phantasy sweeps the black, shapeless Nemesis that drives me to self-annihilation.

May Heaven forgive the folly and morbidity which led us both to so monstrous a fate! Wearied with the commonplaces of a prosaic world; where even the joys of romance and adventure soon grow stale, St. John and I had followed enthusiastically every aesthetic and intellectual movement which promised respite from

our devastating ennui. The enigmas of the symbolists and the ecstasies of the pre-Raphaelites all were ours in their time, but each new mood was drained too soon, of its diverting novelty and appeal.

Only the somber philosophy of the decadents could help us, and this we found potent only by increasing gradually the depth and diablism of our penetrations. Baudelaire and Huysmans were soon exhausted of thrills, till finally there remained for us only the more direct stimuli of unnatural personal experiences and adventures. It was this frightful emotional need which led us eventually to that detestable course which even in my present fear I mention with shame and timidity—that hideous extremity of human outrage, the abhorred practice of grave-robbing.

I cannot reveal the details of our shocking expedition, or catalogue even partly the worst of the trophies adorning the nameless museum we jointly dwelt, alone and servant-less. Our museum was a blasphemous, unthinkable place, where with the Satanic taste of neurotic virtuosi we had assembled an universe of terror and a secret room, far, far, underground; where huge winged daemons carven of basalt and onyx vomited from wide-grinning mouths weird green and orange light, and hidden pneumatic pipes ruffled into kaleidoscopic dances of death the line of red charnel things hand in hand woven in voluminous black hangings. Through these pipes came at will the odors our moods most craved; sometimes the scent of pale funeral lilies; sometimes the narcotic incense of imagined Eastern shrines of the kingly dead, and sometimes—how I shudder to recall it!—the frightful, soul-upheaving stenches of the uncovered grave.

Around the walls of this repellent chamber were cases of antique mummies alternating with comely, lifelike bodies perfectly stuffed and cured by the taxidermist's art, and with headstones snatched from the oldest churchyards of the world. Niches here and there contained skulls of all shapes, and heads preserved in various stages of dissolution. There one might find the rotting,

bald pates of famous noblemen, and the flesh and radiantly golden heads of new-buried children.

Statues and paintings there were, all of fiendish subjects and some executed by St. John and myself. A locked portfolio, bound in tanned human skin, held certain unknown and unnameable drawings which it was rumored Goya had perpetrated but dared not acknowledge. There were nauseous musical instruments, stringed, brass, woodwind, on which St. John and I sometimes produced dissonances of exquisite morbidity and cacodaemoniacal ghastliness; whilst in a multitude of inlaid ebony cabinets reposed the most incredible and unimaginable variety of tomb-loot ever assembled by human madness and perversity. It is of this loot in particular that I must not speak. Thank God I had the courage to destroy it long before I thought of destroying myself!

The predatory excursions on which we collected our unmentionable treasures were always artistically memorable events. We were no vulgar ghouls, but worked only under certain conditions of mood, landscape, environment, weather, season, and moonlight. These pastimes were to us the most exquisite form of aesthetic expression, and we gave their details a fastidious technical care. An inappropriate hour, a jarring lighting effect, or a clumsy manipulation of the damp sod, would almost totally destroy for us that ecstatic titillation which followed the exhumation of some ominous, grinning secret of the earth. Our quest for novel scenes and piquant conditions was feverish and insatiate—St. John was always the leader, and he it was who led the way at last to that mocking, accursed spot which brought us our hideous and inevitable doom.

By what malign fatality were we lured to that terrible Holland churchyard? I think it was the dark rumor and legendry, the tales of one buried for five centuries, who had himself been a ghoul in his time and had stolen a potent thing from a mighty sepulchre. I can recall the scene in these final moments—the pale autumnal moon over the graves, casting long horrible shadows; the

grotesque trees, drooping sullenly to meet the neglected grass and the crumbling slabs; the vast legions of strangely colossal bats that flew against the moon; the antique ivied church pointing a huge spectral finger at the livid sky; the phosphorescent insects that danced like death-fires under the yews in a distant corner; the odors of mold, vegetation, and less explicable things that mingled feebly with the night-wind from over far swamps and seas; and, worst of all, the faint deep-toned baying of some gigantic hound which we could neither see nor definitely place. As we heard this suggestion of baying we shuddered, remembering the tales of the peasantry; for he whom we sought had centuries before been found in this selfsame spot, torn and mangled by the claws and teeth of some unspeakable beast.

I remember how we delved in the ghoul's grave with our spades, and how we thrilled at the picture of ourselves, the grave, the pale watching moon, the horrible shadows, the grotesque trees, the titanic bats, the antique church, the dancing death-fires, the sickening odors, the gently moaning night-wind, and the strange, half-heard directionless baying of whose objective existence we could scarcely be sure.

Then we struck a substance harder than the damp mold, and beheld a rotting oblong box crusted with mineral deposits from the long undisturbed ground. It was incredibly tough and thick, but so old that we finally pried it open and feasted our eyes on what it held.

Much—amazingly much—was left of the object despite the lapse of five hundred years. The skeleton, though crushed in places by the jaws of the thing that had killed it, held together with surprising firmness, and we gloated over the clean white skull and its long, firm teeth, and its eyeless sockets that once had glowed with a charnel fever like our own. In the coffin lay an amulet of curious and exotic design, which had apparently been worn around the sleeper's neck. It was the oddly conventionalized figure of a crouching winged hound, or sphinx, with a semi-canine

face, and was exquisitely carved in antique Oriental fashion from a small piece of green jade. The expression of its features was repellent in the extreme, savoring at once of death, bestiality, and malevolence. Around the base was an inscription in characters which neither St. John nor I could identify; and on the bottom, like a maker's seal, was graven a grotesque and formidable skull.

Immediately upon beholding this amulet we knew that we must possess it; that this treasure alone was our logical pelf from the centuried grave. Even had its outlines been unfamiliar we would have desired it, but as we looked more closely we saw that it was not wholly unfamiliar. Alien it indeed was to all art and literature which sane and balanced readers know, but we recognized it as the thing hinted of in the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred; the ghastly soul-symbol of the corpse-eating cult of inaccessible Leng, in Central Asia. All too well did we trace the sinister lineaments described by the old Arab daemonologist; lineaments, he wrote, drawn from some obscure supernatural manifestation of the souls of those who vexed and gnawed at the dead.

Seizing the green jade object, we gave a last glance at the bleached and cavern-eyed face of its owner and closed up the grave as we found it. As we hastened from the abhorrent spot, the stolen amulet in St. John's pocket, we thought we saw the bats descend in a body to the earth we had so lately rifled, as if seeking for some cursed and unholy nourishment. But the autumn moon shone weak and pale, and we could not be sure.

So, too, as we sailed the next day away from Holland to our home, we thought we heard the faint distant baying of some gigantic hound in the background. But the autumn wind moaned sad and wan, and we could not be sure.

Less than a week after our return to England, strange things began to happen. We lived as recluses; devoid of friends, alone, and without servants in a few rooms of an ancient manor house on a bleak and unfrequented moor; so that our doors were seldom

disturbed by the knock of the visitor.

Now, however, we were troubled by what seemed to be a frequent fumbling in the night, not only around the doors but around the windows also, upper as well as lower. Once we fancied that a large, opaque body darkened the library window when the moon was shining against it, and another time we thought we heard a whirring or flapping sound not far off. On each occasion investigation revealed nothing, and we began to ascribe the occurrences to imagination which still prolonged in our ears the faint, far baying we thought we had heard in the Holland churchyard. The jade amulet now reposed in a niche in our museum, and sometimes we burned a strangely scented candle before it. We read much in Alhazred's *Necronomicon* about its properties, and about the relation of ghosts' souls to the objects it symbolized; and were disturbed by what we read.

Then terror came.

On the night of September 24, 19—, I heard a knock at my chamber door. Fancying it St. John's, I bade the knocker enter, but was answered only by a shrill laugh. There was no one in the corridor. When I aroused St. John from his sleep, he professed entire ignorance of the event, and became as worried as I. It was the night that the faint, distant baying over the moor became to us a certain and dreaded reality.

Four days later, whilst we were both in the hidden museum, there came a low, cautious scratching at the single door which led to the secret library staircase. Our alarm was now divided, for, besides our fear of the unknown, we had always entertained a dread that our grisly collection might be discovered. Extinguishing all lights, we proceeded to the door and threw it suddenly open; whereupon we felt an unaccountable rush of air, and heard, as if receding far away, a queer combination of rustling, tittering, and articulate chatter. Whether we were mad, dreaming, or in our senses, we did not try to determine. We only realized, with the blackest of apprehensions, that the apparently disembodied

chatter was beyond a *doubt in the Dutch language*.

After that we lived in growing horror and fascination. Mostly we held to the theory that we were jointly going mad from our life of unnatural excitements, but sometimes it pleased us more to dramatize ourselves as the victims of some creeping and appalling doom. Bizarre manifestations were now too frequent to count. Our lonely house was seemingly alive with the presence of some malign being whose nature we could not guess, and every night that daemoniac baying rolled over the windswept moor, always louder and louder. On October 29 we found in the soft earth underneath the library window a series of footprints utterly impossible to describe. They were as baffling as the hordes of great bats which haunted the old manor house in unprecedented and increasing numbers.

The horror reached a culmination on November 18, when St. John, walking home after dark from the dismal railway station, was seized by some frightful carnivorous thing and torn to ribbons. His screams had reached the house, and I had hastened to the terrible scene in time to hear a whir of wings and see a vague black cloudy thing silhouetted against the rising moon.

My friend was dying when I spoke to him, and he could not answer coherently. All he could do was to whisper, “The amulet—that damned thing—”

Then he collapsed, an inert mass of mangled flesh.

I buried him the next midnight in one of our neglected gardens, and mumbled over his body one of the devilish rituals he had loved in life. And as I pronounced the last daemoniac sentence I heard afar on the moor the faint baying of some gigantic hound. The moon was up, but I dared not look at it. And when I saw on the dim-lighted moor a wide nebulous shadow sweeping from mound to mound, I shut my eyes and threw myself facedown upon the ground. When I arose, trembling, I know not how much later, I staggered into the house and made shocking obeisances before the enshrined amulet of green jade.

Being now afraid to live alone in the ancient house on the moor, I departed on the following day for London, taking with me the amulet after destroying by fire and burial the rest of the impious collection in the museum. But after three nights I heard the baying again, and before a week was over felt strange eyes upon me whenever it was dark. One evening as I strolled on Victoria Embankment for some needed air, I saw a black shape obscure one of the reflections of the lamps in the water. A wind, stronger than the night-wind, rushed by, and I knew that what had befallen St. John must soon befall me.

The next day I carefully wrapped the green jade amulet and sailed for Holland. What mercy I might gain by returning the thing to its silent, sleeping owner I knew not; but I felt that I must try any step conceivably logical. What the hound was, and why it had pursued me, were questions still vague; but I had first heard the baying in that ancient churchyard, and every subsequent event including St. John's dying whisper had served to connect the curse with the stealing of the amulet. Accordingly I sank into the nethermost abysses of despair when, at an inn in Rotterdam, I discovered that thieves had despoiled me of this sole means of salvation.

The baying was loud that evening, and in the morning I read of a nameless deed in the vilest quarter of the city. The rabble were in terror, for upon an evil tenement had fallen a red death beyond the foulest previous crime of the neighborhood. In a squalid thieves' den an entire family had been torn to shreds by an unknown thing which left no trace, and those around had heard all night a faint, deep, insistent note as of a gigantic hound.

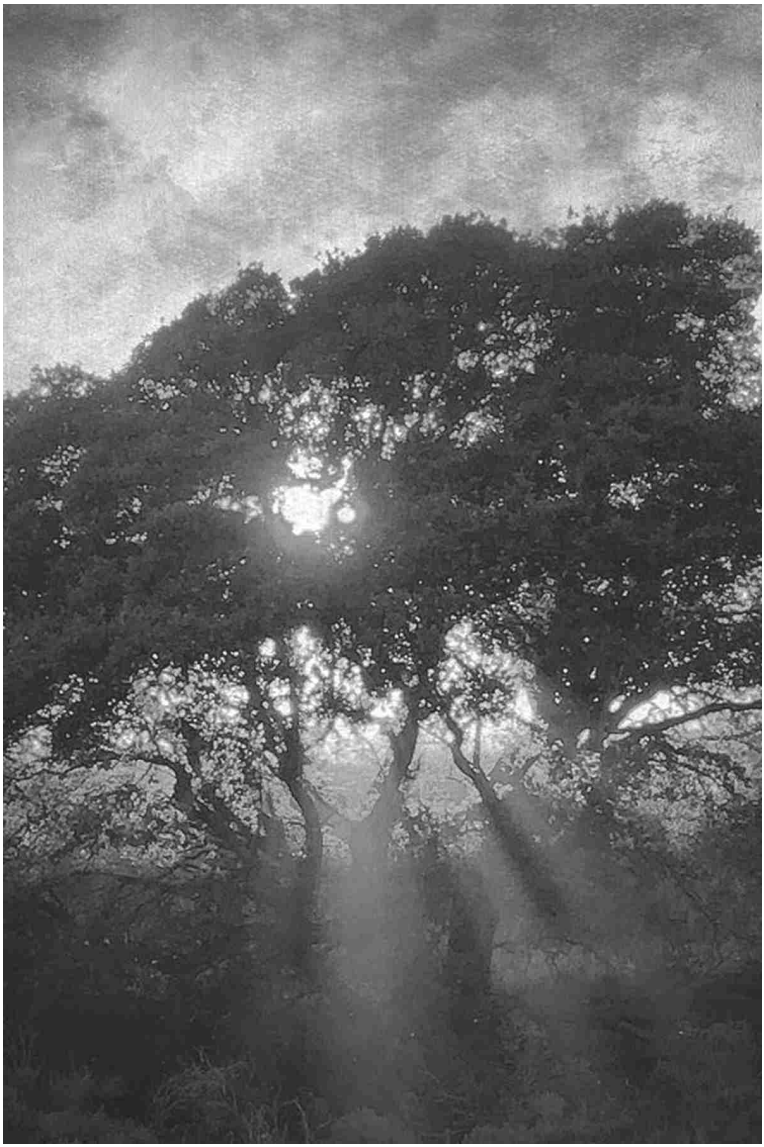
So at last I stood again in the unwholesome churchyard where a pale winter moon cast hideous shadows and leafless trees drooped sullenly to meet the withered, frosty grass and cracking slabs, and the ivied church pointed a jeering finger at the unfriendly sky, and the night-wind howled maniacally from over frozen swamps and frigid seas. The baying was very faint now, and

it ceased altogether as I approached the ancient grave I had once violated, and frightened away an abnormally large horde of bats which had been hovering curiously around it.

I know not why I went thither unless to pray, or gibber out insane pleas and apologies to the calm white thing that lay within; but, whatever my reason, I attacked the half-frozen sod with a desperation partly mine and partly that of a dominating will outside myself. Excavation was much easier than I expected, though at one point I encountered a queer interruption; when a lean vulture darted down out of the cold sky and pecked frantically at the grave-earth until I killed him with a blow of my spade. Finally I reached the rotting oblong box and removed the damp nitrous cover. This is the last rational act I ever performed.

For crouched within that centuried coffin, embraced by a close-packed nightmare retinue of huge, sinewy, sleeping bats, was the bony thing my friend and I had robbed; not clean and placid as we had seen it then, but covered with caked blood and shreds of alien flesh and hair, and leering sentiently at me with phosphorescent sockets and sharp ensanguined fangs yawning twistedly in mockery of my inevitable doom. And when it gave from those grinning jaws a deep, sardonic bay as of some gigantic hound, and I saw that it held in its gory filthy claw the lost and fateful amulet of green jade, I merely screamed and ran away idiotically, my screams soon dissolving into peals of hysterical laughter.

Madness rides the star-wind . . . claws and teeth sharpened on centuries of corpses . . . dripping death astride a bacchanale of bats from nigh-black ruins of buried temples of Belial . . . . Now, as the baying of that dead fleshless monstrosity grows louder and louder, and the stealthy whirring and flapping of those accursed web-wings circles closer and closer, I shall seek with my revolver the oblivion which is my only refuge from the unnamed and unnameable.



THE KING OF STONES

SIMON STRANTZAS

Simon Strantzas is the author of five collections of short fiction, including *Nothing is Everything*, and editor of the award-winning anthologies *Aickman's Heirs* and *Year's Best Weird Fiction Vol. 3*. His stories have appeared in numerous annual "best of" anthologies, in publications such as *Nightmare*, *The Dark*, and *Cemetery Dance*, and have been nominated for the World Fantasy, British Fantasy, and Shirley Jackson Awards. He lives with his wife in Toronto, Canada.

"I confess that the horror I find most frightening is folk and occult horror," admits the author. "Perhaps it stems from my childhood, living through the first waves of panic about Satanism and cults, and films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*. Whatever the cause, my psyche has been affected by these darksome tales, so when the urge struck me to write something truly and unambiguously scary, the first place I turned was to the sort of stories that scared me most.

"This story was also written during an unusually prolific time for me, and like all stories written in a heat, it became an amalgamation of everything that was catching my interests at the time: A24 horror films, riot

grrl music and politics, Arthur Machen's work, as well as the conflicting and converging folk traditions of both England and America.

"It's that sort of serendipitous genesis from which all great stories stem, I like to think. An improbable and unrepeatable confluence of interests. At least that's what I tell myself. At night. When I desperately want to believe I'm safe from whatever it is going on in the woods outside my window."

JUDITH REGRETTED LETTING Rose talk her into the car trip. It was a huge mistake; she knew as soon as she agreed to it, but there was no snatching the words back. Not without causing a rift between them. So she swallowed her regret and assured herself it would be fine. How wrong could it go? Two days later she knew, silently fuming behind the wheel, stuck in a line of traffic with no visible end. And there were still four more days of vacation left ahead of them.

The worst part was Rose appeared unfazed. She sat in the passenger seat, feet on the dashboard so Judith couldn't help but be confronted by those gnarled, twisted toes when she looked through the windshield. Rose whistled and hummed as though the two of them were strolling through a park. As though it were a bright, lazy Sunday morning at home, and there were no troubles anywhere in the world.

Judith wanted to hit something. Instead, she sighed deeply.

Rose looked up from under her sun hat.

"Don't let it stress you out, love. This is part of the adventure. Just try to relax."

Judith took another deep breath. Held it. But was overwhelmed by how much longer they'd be stuck.

"Screw this," she said. "I'm getting off the highway."

"But we're in the middle of traffic. How—"

“Just watch me.”

She signaled, more out of habit than courtesy, and forced her way to the furthest lane amid a chorus of honks and curses. There, she took the car onto the shoulder and put the pedal down. Rose pressed herself flat in terror while Judith navigated the slalom between concrete walls and other cars, inches of leeway on either side. If Rose said something, Judith couldn’t hear it. Not within her haze of anger. And it wasn’t until they reached the exit and left the traffic snarl behind that either of them could relax enough to speak.

“That was . . . dangerous.”

“It all worked out. Nobody was hurt.”

Rose’s calm was slow to return.

“Do you even know where we are?”

Judith didn’t. She hadn’t made note of the exit, nor did she see any street signs that might help them find the exit on a map. But she had a quick plan.

“All we need to do is drive around the traffic. If we follow the highway using side streets and roads, eventually we’ll get to a place where whatever caused the tangle is gone, and we can get back on. Meanwhile, we get to see some more small towns and scenery. And should we end up loving a place, we’ll just stay over for a night. That’s the whole point of this trip, isn’t it? To explore?”

“Yes,” Rose hedged. “Though I was hoping we’d reach Murtaugh before we stopped. This will put us behind schedule.” She took a moment to ponder the idea. “Ah, who cares? Let’s just go and see what happens!”

How had they ended up together? Judith was still amazed. They experienced the world so differently. Rose with her hippie skirts and positive thinking, Judith in her black Slits T-shirt and blurry tattoos; they didn’t look like they lived in the same universe, let alone knew each other. And yet when her ex-girlfriend Kim introduced them at a Bikini Kill show twenty years

ago—back when Judith was writing music reviews for Idaho's second-most popular alt newspaper, and Rose was irregularly publishing her photocopied zine—Judith was blinded by a light that pierced right through her darkness. Even if she didn't always appreciate Rose, part of her knew how much she needed her. It was impossible to put into words how much.

They drove along wooded streets and past untended fields, trying to keep the highway in view as regularly as possible. When it looked to be going north, they drove north. When it appeared to veer west, they too veered west. Sometimes they saw it snake through the woods for a stretch of a few miles—always backed up with red lights—sometimes not for a long while. And eventually they stopped seeing it altogether.

"Maybe the road curved without us realizing it?"

"It's okay, love," Rose said in that supportive voice that made Judith feel like an infant. "Should we stop and ask somebody for directions?"

"Who are we going to ask?"

Rose was optimistic they'd find someone, but Judith knew they hadn't seen a single person since exiting the highway. At first it was satisfying: to not be caught in the grinding traffic, driving freely without anyone in the way, made Judith feel liberated. Even stoplights seemed foreign. But after a time it grew uncomfortable. Nobody walked along the side of the road. No one passed them, driving in the opposite direction. Nobody at all.

Even stranger, there were no houses along the streets. No postboxes or signs. There was the road, and there was nothing else, not even a place to refuel if needed.

It wasn't until half an hour passed that they saw proof they weren't alone. Rose was the one who spotted it, because of course she was. She grew immediately excited, dancing in her seat, and urged Judith to pull over without explaining why. Judith did so, but only because the aimless driving was starting to affect her mood for the worse. Getting out of the car, if only for a moment to

stretch her legs, might fill Judith's reserves for another hour.

But Rose had seen more. As soon as the car stopped, she leaped out and jogged to the edge of the road, beyond which the ground gently sloped away. She stood there, yellow sundress rippling in the breeze, and put her hand to the brim of her enormous hat.

"I knew it," she said, pointing into the distance. "Those are peach trees!"

THEY LEFT THE car behind as they walked downslope toward the orchard. There were almost two dozen trees, arranged in three rows, surrounded by thinning woods. Rose had grabbed her camera from the trunk, so Judith did her best to tolerate the occasional pauses for photographs of drifting pink blossoms and petals. The day was nearing its warmest and brightest, and Judith was starting to burn beneath her black T-shirt. She regretted not bringing a better pair of shoes for walking through grass and dirt, as she'd expected to spend most of the trip on sidewalks and pavement. Her military boots were too cumbersome, and the extra weight she'd put on since she and Rose had met wasn't helping. Besides, if Rose could handle the trek in a pair of open-toed sandals, then surely she could.

When they reached the peach trees, Rose laughed effervescently, and held out her hands as though the petals were snowflakes. All Judith noticed were the fallen peaches littering the ground. Every footstep was precariously close to rot, and she wondered if that was supposed to mean something more than it did.

At the far end of the plot, they made an unexpected discovery. Hidden from the road was one more peach tree. It had been felled at some point in the past, though it wasn't clear by what. It was much larger than the others, yet they remained upright while it lay on its side, not just toppled but uprooted as well.

"This thing is huge," Rose said. "I can't even tell how tall it

was."

She paused, taking the sight in, before excitedly adding, "Get a photo of me with it!"

Judith accepted the camera begrudgingly. Waved her onward.

"I guess go to the uprooted end. It will probably be more interesting."

"But you won't see how tall the tree is," Rose said, pouting from beneath her wide brim.

Judith choked down her disinterest.

"Maybe, but you'll see how thick it is. You can count the rings. Isn't that almost as good?"

For Rose, it was.

They took measured steps around the fallen tree, careful to avoid the crown's dried branches that jutted like spears toward them. Judith reached for the massive trunk for balance and was repulsed; it was like putting her hand on a decaying wet sponge. When the two of them reached the foot of the tree, the sight was astonishing. The roots pulled from the ground were splayed like dozens of fingers, twisted and woven into gnarled knots and patterns. Untold years of weather had stripped away any loose dirt, leaving plenty of room for the spiders and insects to build permanent homes.

"What is that?" Rose asked. Judith peered around the tangled roots.

It was a small cast-iron pot, worn and weathered, sitting knee-high on a slice of tree stump. Around it the ground had been trodden down to the dirt, and there were two larger indentations that couldn't have been footprints. Judith thought they might have been made by someone's knees.

The pot appeared to be filled with black peach stones, each wrinkled and hard. Judith imagined whoever harvested the peaches would eat one on occasion, but it was baffling why they would bother saving the stones.

"Whoa . . ." Rose said, staring into the fallen tree's roots.

Judith turned, and was equally dumbstruck.

The roots had clearly grown randomly and naturally, but nevertheless they'd miraculously woven into an illusion that could be seen only when standing directly in front of the pot. The way they bent and twisted created the illusion of a man seated with eyes closed, his beard twisted into tendrils. The image was rough and gnarled, but there was no mistaking what it was. Judith stepped closer to better examine how the trick worked, but as she did the figure returned to being a shapeless collection of roots. A step back allowed the illusion to regain its shape.

"That's the most incredible thing I've ever seen," Rose said. Even Judith had to agree. "Take the photo so I can show everybody when we get home. No one's going to believe it!"

She bounded in front of the trunk, then straightened her sundress and adjusted her hat so her face found the light.

Rose's hair caught the sun and wouldn't let it go; a corona enveloping her like a halo. Judith was breathless when she saw it —a deep and sudden remembrance of how much she truly loved her. Despite the irritations and minor disagreements, she was lucky to be with her. Judith was so overwhelmed she nearly forgot to raise the camera, and when she did the lens captured the waves emanating from Rose like something by Vermeer. What the camera didn't capture, however, was the illusion of the rooted man. Even when Judith knelt down beside the pot, or tried different angles, the results were the same. The camera saw Rose, but could not see him.

"Photos flatten everything," Rose eventually said, as though the words were meant to comfort Judith, not mollify her. But it didn't help; Judith's inability to capture the illusion was too frustrating. "It's probably better this way. More special. You and I will remember this moment even if we don't have any pictures."

"I'm sure we will," she said, deciding she no longer cared. "We should probably go now. Find the highway before we lose more of the day."

“Okay,” Rose said. “Just let me do one thing.”

While Judith waited, Rose kicked at the rotten peaches in the dirt, looking through their scattered remains. When she found a suitably dark stone, she picked it up and rubbed it between her hands to flay any remaining flesh, then walked to the pot, knelt down in the worn spots, and laced her fingers together as if in prayer, the stone between her palms. She whispered something into her hands before dropping the stone into the pot. She then stood and let her dress fall back to her feet.

“For luck,” she said.

Judith rolled her eyes.

THE RETURN JOURNEY to the car was worse because they walked uphill into the sun. Rose still had boundless energy, taking more photographs of the peach trees and their blossoms, while Judith trudged behind wishing they’d never left the house. She couldn’t help but wonder where they’d be now if they hadn’t taken that off-ramp. Probably already in Murtaugh, sipping a drink on a patio.

“Hey, someone else has pulled over,” Rose said, and Judith looked up to see a small truck parked next to theirs. It was old, a pale shade of blue, and two silhouetted people stood on the edge of the road looking out over it. Judith couldn’t get a clear look at the pair with the sun at their backs, but she suspected they were an older couple by the shape of their shadows.

“I bet they saw the peach trees and stopped, too,” Rose said. “Those blossoms really are beautiful. Where do you think they’re headed?”

“Does it matter?” Judith said. “It’s not like we’re going to see them again anyway.”

Rose stopped. Slumped her shoulders, and turned to face Judith. The look on her face was unexpectedly halting.

“Why do you have to be like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like . . . like you are. Always so negative about everything. Don’t you care about me?”

“What? Of course I do.”

“It affects me, you know. I try to not let it. I try to be cheerful for the both of us. I try to keep us happy. But you make it so hard sometimes. It’s like you’re trying to ruin things. I feel like . . . like . . . like you’re emitting bad vibes or something. All this negative energy radiating from you that I constantly absorb, and I don’t know how much longer I can do it. Do you get what I’m saying? I don’t know how much more I can take on.”

Judith didn’t know what to say. The shock of Rose’s confession was disorienting, and her first instinct was to question what she’d done wrong. But she hadn’t done anything. She wasn’t at fault.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not being negative. I’m just being me. This is who I’ve always been. You used to tell me you liked that about me. That I wasn’t fake.”

“It’s not about being real or fake. It’s about not treating me like your emotional punching bag.”

“I really think you’re blowing this out of proportion.”

That was too much. Rose sputtered, threw up her hands, and stormed off toward the car. Judith felt irritated; the couple on the road probably saw the whole exchange and was judging them.

She let Rose get a minute or two ahead before following. A short break would help, she thought. Let Rose cool off and get some perspective. When Rose got nearer the car, Judith watched her wave at the couple who were standing there, though Judith wasn’t sure if they returned the gesture.

JUDITH WOKE IN the dark, not sure where she was. Opening her eyes made her head hurt, an ache that spread from the base of her neck forward, and when she tried to reach up to feel what happened

she discovered she couldn't; her hands had been bound. But that made no sense. And why was it so hard to think?

Her last memory was of sweating through her shirt by the time she reached the road. Rose had been speaking to the strange couple, two women somewhere in their forties or fifties, dressed in ill-fitting clothes and looking slumped and miserable. She babbled, not giving them the chance to talk, while Judith continued to the car, having no interest in meeting strangers, not when she was already upset. Why had they chosen to crowd her and Rose instead of driving an extra few minutes up the road? The orchard had to be visible from elsewhere. Or if not, there was likely another. Orchards aren't planted in isolation. Judith had popped open the trunk and forcefully pushed aside Rose's bags to get to her own. There was another shirt in there, an extra she brought in case of emergency. The last thing she remembered was turning her back on Rose and the nameless couple to find it.

Where was she? Indoors, in a room that was dark, but not without some light coming through a window. Each blink was painful, but she forced herself to ignore it. Judging by the color of light, it had to be late afternoon, which meant she'd lost a few hours. She tried again to pull her arms free, but they were tied behind her back. Maybe with coarse rope, like something used on a farm. The air had that kind of smell, too. Earthy, mixed with dust and manure. And peaches. She smelled peaches. The chair she was seated on was hardbacked, and in the gloom she made out shelves around her. On the other side of the room was a steel sink beside a stack of crates. It was some sort of storage room.

Where was Rose?

If they hurt Rose . . .

She couldn't let herself think about it. Focus on the immediate. Her hands were tied, but her legs weren't. Could she somehow stand? Maybe get to a shelf and find something to cut herself free? She tried kicking out but the chair wouldn't budge. She tried planting her feet on the floor and leaning, but the ropes were too

tight; she couldn't get enough leverage. Fits of struggling didn't loosen anything. They just tired her out.

The door opened before she could do more. Two middle-aged women walked in, stooped with dark scarves wrapped around their heads. Judith couldn't tell if they were the women from the road. She couldn't remember what those women looked like.

"Where am I? What's going on? Where's Rose?"

Her own voice was so loud it made her head throb. But the women didn't respond. The one with a lower lip that extended in a permanent pout filled a bucket in the sink while the other, round-faced with gray wisps of hair protruding from under her scarf, took hold of Judith's face and inspected it from different angles. Judith considered trying to bite the woman, or just spit at her, but with her hands tied Judith feared how vulnerable she was.

Once satisfied, the woman shuffled back to the door and opened it for a third woman to enter. This one was stern and lean, her hair tied up and as close to silver as Judith had ever seen. The new woman approached Judith and said nothing. Instead, she bent close, nostrils flared, and inhaled deeply. She ran her finger along the side of Judith's face and scowled. Shook her head. Stood up. The round-faced woman reappeared, accompanied by the pouting woman who was carrying the bucket. The silver-haired woman pointed at Judith, then left the room.

"Please, tell me what's going on," Judith implored, but there was no suggestion of understanding. Instead of answer, the pouting woman put down the bucket and lifted out a sopping rag. She twisted out the water. The round-faced woman's arms dropped on Judith's shoulders, pinning her down. Judith screamed, but they disregarded her as they scrubbed her clean.

THEY LED HER outside, still bound by coarse ropes. The sun had already ducked behind the horizon, but there was still enough light for Judith to see where she was. A small village formed by no

more than a dozen hand-built ramshackle houses. The inhabitants of those houses stood in their mismatched clothes, witnessing Judith's march into the oncoming night. The pair of haggard women had cleaned her and removed her T-shirt, her jeans and boots, dressing her instead in a long yellowed gown that felt gritty against her bare skin. They did not give her shoes.

She didn't know where they were taking her. No one would answer her pleas. The realization that she'd been trapped and would not survive didn't elude her, but she struggled to keep from thinking about it. That ended, however, once she was in open air, being stared at by dozens of scrutinizing eyes. The fear took hold faster than she could contain it.

"Rose!" she screamed. "Where are you, Rose? Rose!"

The villagers looked at one another, aghast. But Judith couldn't stop screaming. It went on and on and did not stop until her pouting captor struck her hard across the face. Judith shut up immediately from shock. The woman appeared shaken, too, unsteady, while her partner stared with wide eyes. The rest of the villagers looked shocked as well, some of them mouthing their confusion. Some of those looks then shifted toward anger.

The grunts and chirps from the villagers drowned out Judith's cries. They ran toward her, a wave of unwashed people dressed in patched clothes, and she struggled to escape. But when the villagers descended, it wasn't on her but on the pouting woman.

The woman didn't try to run or protect herself. She stood stoically as they arrived, unmoved by fear or regret. When their punches and kicks landed, she said nothing. There was no sound except of meat pounded and bones broken. The villagers tore at the woman in silence while Judith, unable to watch without wanting to scream, was led away by the round-faced woman and another, taller, woman with graying black hair and pinched eyes.

Behind Judith the bloodthirsty attack did not slow or stop. When they loaded her into a rusty and puttering truck filled with crates of peaches, she could not bring herself to look back. If that

was what happened to one of their own, what might happen to her? To Rose? It was too painful to contemplate.

No one spoke to her in the truck. No one answered her questions. She struggled against the hands that pinned down her arms, but couldn't shake them free. And if she could, so what? There would be nothing she could do. Nowhere she could go. She had no option but to sit there and tolerate the stench of sickeningly sweet peaches while she conserved her strength in hopes an opportunity would present itself. Were she younger, were it the days before she met Rose, when she attended rallies and raved at shows, the anger and aggression would have carried her through. When she was all wired muscle and attitude. But she'd grown older, less interested in changing the world, and become too soft and weak, too unobservant. And because of that, she'd lost both herself and Rose.

The car pulled over to the side of the road. The sky was an impenetrable black, so far outside any artificial lights, so protected overhead from any that were natural. Judith didn't even see the reflection of the taillights ahead until she was dragged from the truck. When she did, they looked familiar, but it took a moment to realize why. They belonged to her car. Hers and Rose's. Its trunk was open.

In the distance a group of torches burned. The round-faced woman and her tall partner yanked Judith again, directing her down the slope and toward the distant flames made smaller still by the vast darkness.

Upturned roots and branches, fallen brambles and pebbles, dug into and scratched her bare feet. This would be her end. She knew it. So much time fighting, so many things done wrong. And for what? To lead her to this moment? She'd carried so much hate and anger for so long, but it amounted to nothing in the end. It made no difference. It made nothing better.

The air stank sour of rotten fruit, and Judith couldn't keep from stumbling over the uneven ground. But the two women

would not be slowed; each time Judith tripped, they lifted her and pushed her forward. Even when she hesitated, even when she fell, scraping her face on something she couldn't see, they pressed her on toward the flames.

And when she was finally pushed through the penumbrae and into the light, the crowd of villagers was revealed. Some were dressed in gowns similar to hers, both women and men, shoeless, hands together in supplication. Others were dressed as they'd been in the village, in old worn clothes, unwashed and unrepaired. She saw a man with a graying beard wearing a shirt that looked familiar, like one of hers. It had been rolled up in her suitcase, left in the trunk of the car. Judith knew what that meant and wanted to scream.

But didn't. Instead, she stopped, powerless to speak. The crowd of villagers had parted. And in their parting Rose was revealed, feet torn and bloodied, face bruised and reddened from her own hard scrubbing.

Judith let out a throaty chirp when she tried to call Rose's name. Yet Rose heard it, and her eyes alighted with hope and love and terror. Judith struggled to run to her but was held in place. The distance between them insurmountable.

Judith lashed out, but couldn't connect with anyone. The cast-iron pot waited before the fallen tree; the stump she'd seen earlier was gone, replaced by a circle of misshapen bricks and a fire. The pot hung above it from a metal tripod, the stones inside dulled by the heat.

"What do you want?" Judith demanded. "Why are you doing this to us?" And still there was no answer.

But some faces turned to her. Some opened their mouths and made a horrible wet clucking. And Judith understood with horror why the villagers had been so silent. Behind their cracked lips, behind their decaying teeth, their tongues were gone. Cut out. Only stumps of dark flesh that rolled and convulsed in the firelight.

“Judith!” Rose yelled as she struggled to escape. “I love you, Judith,” she said, and began to weep.

“Let her go!” Judith screamed. “Let her go! Oh my god, Rose. I love you! I love you so much! Let her go! Let her go right now!” She fought against the hands holding her. “I’m going to kill you! I’m going to kill you all! Let her the fuck go!”

Judith screamed and screamed, but no one cared.

They dragged Rose forward to the burning pot and forced her to her knees. She sobbed uncontrollably, tears and mucus streaming down her face, her speech unintelligible. Her captors took care to position her in the worn grooves as more villagers approached, grabbing hold of her arms, her legs, her shoulders. She cried out in pain, cried out for help. But Judith couldn’t give it to her, no matter how much she struggled and cursed. The villagers continued, slipping a cracked wooden yoke around Rose’s neck, twisting the oiled bolts tighter until her head couldn’t move. Rose’s tear-strewn face was pointed toward the splayed roots of the fallen tree, and she stared directly at the illusion she and Judith had discovered an impossible few hours earlier.

“What’s going on?” she blubbered, the yoke forcing her jaw shut. “What are you doing?”

“Let her go!” was all Judith could say in her manic state. Over and over again.

The silver-haired woman appeared from the crowd, dressed in a long brown patchwork skirt that just covered her bare feet. Her long tresses had been let down, her eyes glistened, and in her mottled hands she held a long pair of metal tongs. She pointed at Rose with an unsteady hand and the villagers pulled back Rose’s hair, away from her face.

Judith screamed, no longer capable of forming words, becoming a primal force of rage and terror. She felt it embody her, overwhelm her, become her; an enveloping and transforming red mist of pain. With her newfound power she wrenched with all her strength and tore an arm free from her captor. And, before anyone

could stop her, she drove her elbow into the tall woman's face, breaking something, and tried to claw out the shorter woman's eyes. Villagers appeared suddenly, piling onto her, trapping her arm before it could do further damage. She roared with rage but couldn't prevent what was happening. Couldn't prevent herself from being subdued.

All the while, the woman standing over Rose wasn't distracted. She lifted the heavy tongs and placed them in the cast-iron pot. By the time Judith was immobilized, everyone had stopped to watch the silver-haired woman with reverence. Everyone except Rose, who continued to bottomlessly sob.

The stones shifted and popped until the woman removed the tongs, holding a smoldering black stone in their grip. The villagers uttered a sound in unison—an indescribable low-pitched drone as though they were attempting to sing—and the silver-haired woman placed the burning stone on Rose's forehead.

Rose's scream nearly shattered the world.

Judith screamed, too. Anger flowing as she watched the villagers push down on Rose, steadying her so the old woman could add another burning stone, then another. One by one the stones were placed in a circle around Rose's head while Judith cursed and sobbed impotently. Rose no longer cried, no longer moved as the stones embedded themselves in her melted flesh. Blood streamed down her unconscious face, soaking her gown as Judith continued to rage.

She screamed until she couldn't hold a breath any longer, screamed until her throat was raw and her limbs were weak. Until she could no longer fight against the villagers bearing down on her. Then, depleted, she collapsed in the grip of her captors. All strength and rage burned away. An empty shell.

But the villagers would not allow her to fall. They held her up, striking the sides of her face until her eyes opened, and made her watch as they lifted the unconscious Rose from where she knelt and brought her to the felled peach tree. They hoisted her into the

tangle of roots, her arms spread wide, her legs crossed at the ankle. Blood soaked the top of her gown black.

They pitched Judith forward, dragged her to the cast-iron pot, forced her to kneel. Hanging before her was Rose, caught in the roots of the tree, the mirage of the bearded man behind her. It was too much to bear. Judith wished she could close her eyes, but couldn't. They were locked on Rose's drooping face.

The silver-haired woman approached, her arms spattered to the elbow with Rose's blood, dragging the long tongs behind her. She stood between the pot and the tree and looked at what remained of Judith. She cocked her head, then put her hand on the side of Judith's face. Judith recoiled, tried to pull away as the vestiges of herself fled. The woman waited until they were gone before stroking Judith's face.

When she was done, she stood and inserted the tongs again into the burning pot. Judith did not move, but the villagers pinned her down nonetheless. Pinned her as the woman removed another wrinkled black stone. Judith's body tremored, but she was unaware of it.

And the woman dropped the stone onto the ground.

She held out her hand. A villager rushed to her side and handed her a full waterskin. She uncorked it and spilled the contents over the black stone. It sizzled under the stream, and when it stopped the women bent and fished the stone from the mud. She stood, and without brushing away the dirt and debris, placed it in her mouth.

There was a moment of silence before the first tremor traveled across her body. Then there was a second, forewarning the seizure that quickly followed. The woman made a choking sound, like something being pulled from the muck, and pointed toward Rose's limp body. Blood poured out of the silver-haired woman's open mouth and over her chin, followed by the squirm of a shriveled black tongue. It danced across her lips as the woman croaked a single word.

“Watch.”

And Judith watched, too beaten and numb to resist. She watched Rose hanging there, her body limp, her chest heaving with troubled breaths. And as she watched she thought of nothing. Not of why this was happening. Not of the last thing she’d said to Rose. Not of all the times she’d been irritated, impatient, or angry with her. Not of all the times she wished she were somewhere else. She thought of nothing. Nothing but of Rose and how she’d failed her.

Judith wanted to speak, but there were no words.

Suddenly, Rose’s unconscious body jerked. The villagers dropped to their knees. Bowed their heads.

But not Judith. She was transfixed.

Rose jerked again, and every limb went rigid at once. They stretched out from beneath her filthy gown like sticks. Her eyes opened wide. So wide. So very, very wide. As though she were trying to see everything at once.

“Oh my god,” she screamed. “Oh my god!

“I can—all of—oh my god!

“All of the secrets. All of the secrets and the pains. Oh my god, I can feel them. I can see them. Oh my god.

“They’re in me. Under my skin. I’m overflowing. I’m transforming.

“Oh my god. Look at me!

“Look at me now!”

She convulsed, limbs flailing, eyes rolling white. And the roots of the dead tree began to tremble, to creak. To move. They curled toward the hanging Rose, reached across and wrapped around her, one at a time. Over and over, constricting until they enveloped her, pulled her in. Took her and her crown of thorns away from this world.

“The King needs his Queen,” the silver-haired woman croaked as she stood, one tired leg after the other. “And she is a vessel primed.”

The woman bent down and placed something on the ground in front of Judith. Then stood and touched the kneeling woman's face.

"From their union might sweet fruit spill."

With that, the woman spit the bloodied stone back into the pot.

JUDITH KNELT IN front of the fire and whispered. No one held her down any longer. No one had to. There was nowhere for her to go. With Rose gone there was nothing left. Just Judith and her memories of all she'd done wrong, of all the trouble she'd caused. She knelt where Rose had, a stream of words falling from her underbreath while the villagers stood in a circle, silent and patient.

It was her fault. She'd prepared Rose. Had been preparing her since the moment they met at that show, so many years before. Primed her to suffer, to take on what wasn't hers, until it bore her out, opened a hole that needed to be filled. Judith had prepared her unknowingly for this moment. To suffer their sins, to carry them away. To be taken below as some ancient payment, some ritualistic bargain. It was Judith's fault it happened. Judith's, and Judith's alone.

The knife the silver-haired woman left lay in front of her. Its handle carved from old wood, its blade curved and thin. It did not gleam in the dying firelight. It did nothing but wait for Judith as she whispered and moaned and tried to expel everything she'd seen, everything she'd done.

But she couldn't. She couldn't relieve herself of the burden. It weighed down on her, heavier and heavier. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't do anything but be crushed by it. She was going to die there, alone amid the peach trees. Alone in the dark of nowhere. And her anger would plant itself like a poisonous seed in the soil. Grow outward. Corrupt everything until there was nothing left to corrupt. Until it was all destroyed.

Unless she unburdened herself.

She rattled off her mistakes, listed her crimes, her sins; spoke each, one after the other, until her tongue carried them all.

Then she snatched up the knife.

The blade was sharp and quick and when she was done she took the writhing length of flesh that bore what she no longer could and dropped it into the black iron pot to cook and shrivel, harden and blacken. Become a stone condensed to pure sorrow. Another piece, another rune, to summon the twin bounties of harvest and forgiveness.

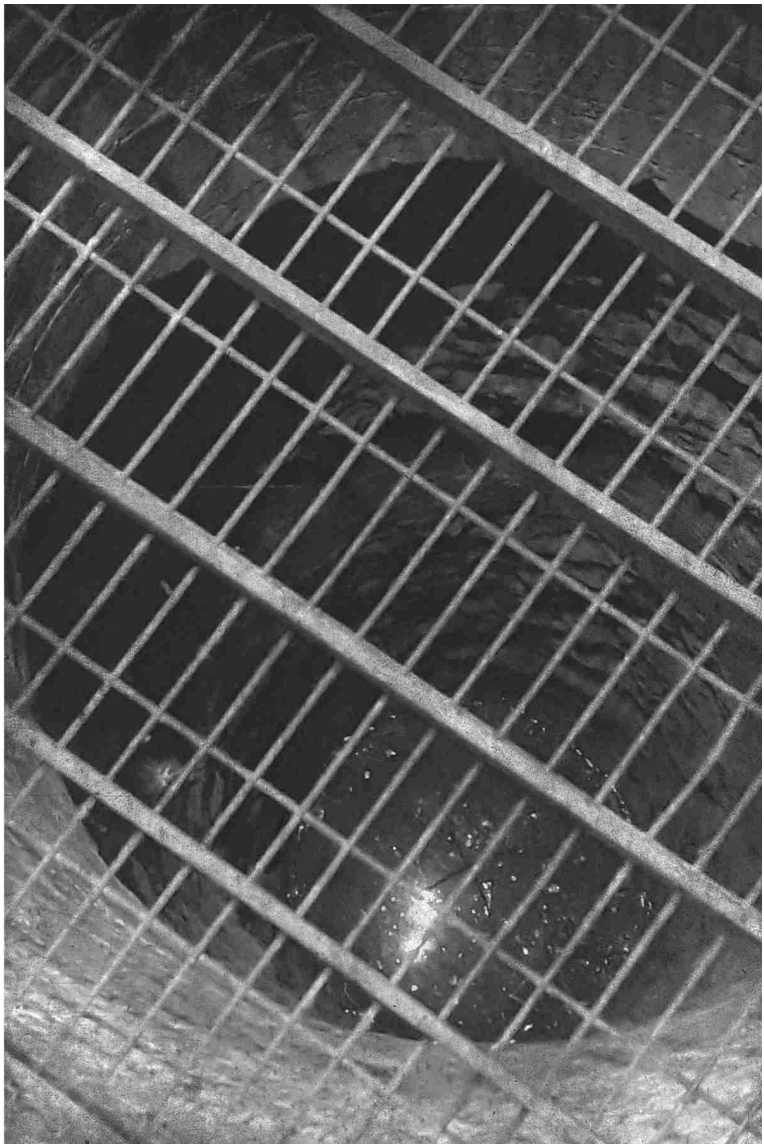
But forgiveness had a price. And sometimes that price demanded forgiveness of its own. Forgiveness no one else could grant. Not the King. Not his courtier. Not even his new Queen, the gift of a village to one so much older, adorned with the purest of crowns. Forgiveness that could only come from within.

Forgiveness like that required an impossible amount of strength.

Strength Judith did not have.

So instead of forgiveness, she gave away the only things she had left to give. Gave away her burdens and her pains. Gave them to the King as so many had before, and as many would in the future. And the relief that filled her when she was done was impossible to express.

She no longer had the words.



THE DEVIL'S PISS POT

JAN EDWARDS

Jan Edwards is an author with four novels and over fifty short story credits in horror, fantasy, mainstream, and crime fiction, including various volumes of *The MX Book of New Sherlock Holmes Stories*, *Into the Night Eternal: Tales of French Folk Horror*, and *The Daemons of Devil's End*. Some of her supernatural and horror short stories are collected *in Fables & Fabrications*.

She is also an editor with the award-winning independent publisher Alchemy Press (with husband Peter Coleborn). Their anthologies together include three volumes of *The Alchemy Press Book of Horror*, while her novella *Something Small for Yolanda* appeared from the same imprint.

She is a recipient of the British Fantasy Society's special Karl Edward Wagner Award and the Arnold Bennett Book Prize for her World War II crime novel *Winter Downs*, the first volume in her Bunch Courtney Investigates series.

"There was no one source for my story," explains the author. "It is the product of a childhood in the UK steeped in Sussex folklore. Among the many legends in the villages where I lived was the St. Leonard's Forest

Dragon (reported in a news pamphlet of 1614 as 'a nine-foot-long dragon that killed men with its poison, but didn't eat them, preferring rabbits and smaller creatures. It was colored black, with a red belly.').

"Sussex also has its very own breed of water dragon known as 'knuckers,' which live in deep pools. The most famous knucker tale comes from Lyminster: the Lyminster Knucker Pool is said to be both 'bottomless' and fed by a natural spring. This is another common archetype—the Silent Pool (between Guildford and Dorking) being the best known.

"I also included both the folklore of pagan tree rings found along the downs (Cissbury, Chanctonbury, etc.); the best-know of all Downland myths, the Devil's Dyke near Brighton; and added that stalwart of so many legends worldwide: that of a guardian(s) of gate/well/portal, and the stage was set for 'The Devil's Piss Pot.'"

KEIRA ARNOLDSON POKED at the remnants of a limp salad and envied Daisy's fearless ability to wolf down calories. Most of the crew had wandered off home to their families and home cooking, which had left her alone with Daisy Bale and Jack Raffen, savoring the delights of the Dolphin's Rest's "Burger and Beer" offer.

Daisy wiped up the last smear of ketchup and pushed her plate away, patting her board-flat belly and belching loudly. "What are you up to this evening, Keira? Fancy a trip down to Brighton, fleshpot of the south coast?"

The question startled Keira. Daisy had not paid her much attention since she had started with the Park Ranger Service. She might even go as far as saying Daisy had been a bit of a pill. Nothing overt; just little comments here and there. She smiled tentatively. "The schools broke up last week. Won't the place be crawling with tourists?"

“Worthing then? Eastbourne?”

“Not tonight.”

“Jack?” Daisy turned to the man seated across the table.

Raffen took his time answering, folding his newspaper and sitting back to stare at her. “I’m not the dancing kind, Daisy,” he said, “and I have things to do. You know that.”

Daisy laid a hand on Keira’s arm and leaned in for a stage whisper. “You’ll find when you’ve been here a while that our valiant team leader has no social life.”

Keira wanted to say she couldn’t blame him. She wasn’t fond of crowds and of clubbing, in particular. It had made her student years difficult at times. She had been labeled as boring or miserable when crippling shyness had always been her affliction. It was the proximity of so many people, and not the closed spaces of clubs and bars, that made her a little claustrophobic. But she was trying hard to fit in with her park ranger colleagues, even if it was only a summer job before her final year’s study at Oxford. She wondered how she could get out of being cornered by Daisy without causing offense.

“Jack’s an old man.” Daisy’s grin was overstretched, showing small, uneven teeth. “He can’t keep up.”

“Careful.” Raffen glared at her over the rim of his pint pot. “This old man has a ten-mile ride planned. Plenty of time before sunset.”

“Show off.” Daisy swiped up Raffen’s jacket lying on the stool at the end of the table and handed it to him. It sagged in her hands, its pockets weighted by the cell phone, multi-tool, and random detritus that almost every ranger carried around with them. “Off you go then.”

“When I’m ready.”

“D’ya think he’s actually doing that ride?” she said. “Too much effort in this heat. So what do you want to do, K?”

Daisy’s confidence and her endless flirting with their enigmatic boss was a constant wonder to Keira. “It’s a gorgeous evening. I

think I'd rather be out," she said.

"Yeah." Daisy squinted out into the sun-bright car park. "So what then?"

"I thought I might head back up to Bolbury Down. I want to get some evening shots of the trees. Nothing like a few mood photos to impress the faculty."

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "Why Bolbury?"

"Research. I can't figure out what makes it so unpopular. It's no different to a half dozen other hillforts along this stretch of the Downs."

"Magic." Daisy took a pull at her pint of BrewDog ale. "Gran reckons . . ."

"That the reason for a tree ring on Bolbury Down is to guard the Devil's piss pot?"

"There is that. You do know the well inside the hillfort is said to be bottomless?"

"They always are. Pools and wells in myth are invariably silent, or without end. Or both."

"Do you want to hear the story or not?" said Daisy.

"Sorry. Go on."

"The legend goes that there was once a convent in the vale just below Bolbury Down, but Lucifer came one night to take them down to the underworld. Now back then there were vineyards all over these downs and the nuns were known for their fine wines. They plied Old Nick with strong drink until he was out of his skull and sent him on his way. With a skin full of liquor, he stopped at the top of Bolbury Down for a piss and it burned a hole right through to Hell, and because he was so drunk he fell right into it. When the mother superior saw that, she and her nuns rushed up the hill and piled boulders into the spring so that he could not come back to claim their immortal souls."

"I hadn't heard the whole story before. Only that the Devil made the well. Was there ever a convent?"

Daisy grinned. "Who knows. But Old Nick had a bit of a thing

for Sussex nuns, one way and another, didn't he, Jack?"

"I doubt Old Nick had much to do with it," he said. "These stories go way back before convents and the Lucifer myths ever got a foothold."

"I don't think there's a hill along the length of the Downs that hasn't got some Satan story attached to it," said Keira. "There's Devil's Dyke. Oh, and Chanctonbury Ring. Speaking of which, the legend over there includes the dew pond. Does Bolbury's?"

"Of course. That's the knucker hole."

"Knucker?"

Daisy spread her hands and pulled a face. "Sussex's very own water dragon. Call yourself a historian? Look it up."

"That's enough, Daisy. Stop giving her a hard time." Raffen's face made Keira lean instinctively away from him. He was plainly annoyed, and so was she: shyness did not mean she could not hold her own against an airhead like Daisy Bale.

Daisy was unimpressed. "Don't be a killjoy, Jack. Take no notice of him, K. Knowing the context matters if you want to understand the place. It's a pretty spot this time of day. You could get some good pictures for your dissertation."

"Daisy, you talk some amazing crap at times," said Raffen.

"Do I? Only from what Gran says . . ."

Raffen leaned forward, prodding Daisy's arm with a callused forefinger. "You tell Aunt Maude from me that she says way too much."

Keira looked from one to the other. It had never occurred to her that Daisy's relaxed way with their boss came from their being related. "Is Jack your uncle?" she asked.

"Cousin." Daisy scowled at Raffen then turned her back on him. "Okay, Keira. How about this: we go to Bolbury and then after we can go on to the Admiral in Worthing. It's open mic night. Always good for a laugh."

Keira nodded. She did not want to alienate Daisy by refusing *all* her suggestions, and pub music was something she felt she

could cope with. “Okay, yes. That sounds fun.”

“We can lock up for you,” Daisy said to Raffen. “Save your poor old legs.”

“Don’t stay up there too long,” he said. “If I get a good time in on the ride I may see you up there, anyway.”

They watched him leave in a silence that Keira broke only when he was out of sight. “He seemed not to like your plan. Okay, I’ll buy it. What did the Devil do to the dew pond?”

Daisy’s posture tightened, becoming wary. “Nothing out of the ordinary. Oh, there’s the usual nonsense. Bottomless well; animals won’t drink from it; birds won’t fly over it, dah de dah. And according to Gran there’s a . . .” Daisy held up her hands as Keira started to laugh. “Only passing on what she told me. I do know that sheep go missing up at Bolbury. That is an absolute fact.”

“I shall bear it in mind. I really would like to get a few more photographs of the wellhead. I would have done it yesterday when I was up there with Jack, but he seemed in a hurry to get away.”

“Jack doesn’t like people hanging around Bolbury.”

“I could tell. He couldn’t get me away quick enough last night. After I’d finished surveying the pool I wanted to revisit the fort. He practically had a fit. I thought I had done something wrong.”

“Jack’s a weirdo. Nice most of the time, but still a weirdo. You know he fought tooth and nail to stop the place being used for school trips?

The board compromised by improving security around the well and the pool.” Daisy swilled the last of her beer and avoided meeting Keira’s eye by scrolling through a few screens on her iPhone. “Lot more to that than we’ll ever know. C’mon. Quicker we get up to Bolbury, the quicker we can get to the Admiral.”

Keira nodded. She didn’t want to go drinking. It was a distraction. Displacement activity, she knew that. Deadlines loomed. A frantic six weeks left to get her dissertation signed off, and she simply could not afford to request another year’s extension. She checked her phone: 6:21. “Tell you what. There’s

two hours' daylight left and I will only be a half hour up there. I'll catch up with you."

"You really shouldn't."

"I really shouldn't what?"

Daisy bent down to pick up her bag, hiding her face behind her hair as she did so. "Bolbury Down is not a place to go on your own. Not this close to sunset. I'll go with you."

THIRTY MINUTES LATER they were walking across the drought-blonded grass of the Downs. To their left, Bolbury's topknot of oaks and ashes dominated the landscape. To their right, the downland's natural patchwork billowed out toward the distant sparkle of sea. Yes, Keira thought, there is a hint of *otherness* about Bolbury Down.

Daisy unlocked the gate in the tall railings that surrounded the fenced-off dew pond and they stepped inside the enclosure. "Nothing much to see," she observed. Daisy crouched to pick up several flat stones from the heap piled at the water's edge. "Jack likes to play," she said at Keira's curious glance. "The trick is to hit that rock on the far side." She stooped to skim the stone across the water and swore when it sank a bounce shy of the mark.

Keira stared across the rough circle of inky liquid, wondering how she hadn't noticed the rock before. Yes, it was concealed by a tussock of sedge that was defiantly green against the straw-paleness covering the rest of the hillside, and yes, it was on the far side of the pond, but it was very nearly in the boulder category; close to knee-height and dazzling white. She crouched low and took several shots of it across the pool. The water levels had not dropped after several weeks of drought, but she didn't buy Daisy's tale of it being linked by a tunnel to the well sunk deep beneath Bolbury's hillfort.

Daisy sent another stone skimming across the pool, leaving small blips in the surface that reverted rapidly to its habitual

glassy stillness. Her third missile knocked against the rock with a sharp, metallic chime that made Keira wince.

"Yes!" Daisy punched the air and then stared at the target.

A small wing of crows screamed their way overhead, and from some way off Keira detected the distant swish of traffic. The only signs that anything in the world had moved for a count of ten.

Daisy's expectant smile faded and she dropped the remaining stone in her hand back onto the small cairn. "Finished?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good. It's getting late." Daisy headed for the gateway. "Get a move on or you'll lose the light inside the fort."

Keira couldn't argue with that. Evening shadows were overrunning the path to the hilltop already, so that the ground seemed to slope away on either side far more steeply than she knew it did. The illusion was so great that she held her arms out for balance as they made their way toward the hill's summit.

The famous tree ring at the top of the hill marked the defensive ditch around Bolbury Down's Iron Age fort. Rangers had laid a path within the circuit so that school children and the general public could walk around the inside of the fort without causing erosion. No trees grew within the fort itself, however. Only bracken and brambles, and the odd foxglove and willow herb, so that the tall iron fence topped with razor wire stood at the center in splendid isolation.

"Like a teeny-tiny prison," Daisy observed from where the women stood together on the ranger-made path.

"Without the prisoner." Keira took several shots from the path, taking in the large tin sign attached to the fence that displayed sigils for both corrosive elements and poison that made for a macabre message. It was quiet within the circle. No birdsong, she noted, only the occasional squeak of branch on branch, and all sounds from the outside subdued. The evening sunlight that did manage to percolate through to the glade lent a warm apricot

wash, but it seemed not to penetrate far inside the central enclosure's deepening shadows. Glimpses of the sandstone wellhead could only be seen between the black stripes of the close-packed railings, so that when she moved her head, Keira had the impression of tiger stripes rippling around its length.

"C'mon." Daisy stepped off the path and waded through the bracken to unlock the gate, and the two of them entered the spartan arena.

Six feet within the railings, at the enclosure's epicenter, three and a half feet of sandstone rose up, red and gold in the dying echoes of sunlight. The center was hollow, like a small volcanic ring, with one single break in its symmetry: a V-shaped cleft just wide enough to ease through to the well itself. From within that sandstone barrier, the sound of trickling water ruffled the quiet as sharp as cut glass.

"Apparently the Devil's piss carved a handy entrance for the visitors' convenience." Daisy waved Keira ahead. "After you."

Keira took a cautious step forward. The gap was a little over a three-foot span at its widest, slicing cleanly through the formation. There was no doubting the wellhead was ancient, the gap possibly man-made, and doubtless the reason why the hillfort had been built. It was equally obvious why it had been abandoned. She peered in at the water and sniffed. There was a strong smell of damp stone and vegetation, and something sharper, danker, oilier than she could define. The stray wafts of light that had filtered through picked out a small patch of water shimmering in rainbow colors, though the surface was mirror-smooth, with no hint of a current. "There's no spring," she said. "I thought I heard running water."

"You can, sometimes." Daisy leaned in to peer over her shoulder. "Condensation from the rocks."

Keira knelt to dip her fingertips into the water but stopped mid-move, recalling the signs. "It smells rather odd," she said.

"Taste it."

“Isn’t it toxic?”

“Never killed me. Go on. Give it a try.”

There was a challenge in the voice that Keira knew she could not ignore. Daisy was one of those queen bees who set levels of initiation before bestowing her acceptance upon a newcomer, and Keira knew that backing away from the task would mean being ridiculed for weeks, maybe months. She dipped her cupped hand into the water and raised it to her lips. Water spilling over and though her fingers was the faint brown of weak tea, and its rank smell made her gag, but Daisy’s cold challenge was nothing she could defy. She dribbled the tiny portion left in her palm into her mouth.

Daisy laughed like a drain when Keira spat it out. “It’s undrinkable,” Daisy said. “It’s why Jack had it fenced off.”

“Is it as deadly as those signs make out?” Keira spat several more times and scrubbed her tongue against her sleeve, angry with herself for allowing the woman to bully her into such an act of rank stupidity.

“There are high concentrations of minerals in there.” Daisy giggled at Keira’s horror. “Nothing that would kill you with just a few drops, but nobody would drink more than that. Too foul for words. Livestock won’t touch it, of course. But Jack was adamant it was too dangerous to allow public access.”

“How deep is it?” Keira asked.

Daisy spread her hands. “Dunno. Deep. Jack says a dive team tried to scope it out once, probably the same crew who plumbed the dew pond. Apparently there’s a sharp bend about ten feet down that made it far too narrow for spelunking.”

“Makes you wonder why there was ever a hillfort if it’s so toxic. I imagine it must have been potable at some point.”

Daisy stared at her feet. “Devil piss? I doubt it.”

“Ha. I hear excavations around the fort turned up a lot of finds of the kind common to places like this. Offerings to deities dating back to pre-Roman eras. Knife blades—flint and bronze and stone,

some inscribed with runes."

"I doubt they were here for begged indulgences," Daisy replied. "The offerings were probably made to stave off evil."

Keira knew that made sense. Ancient people would see any death as a sign from whatever spirit inhabited this hilltop fortress. They would do everything in their power to placate it. "So why doesn't the legend give us more than a crude joke?" she murmured. "Think about that. Devil's piss pot. It smells vile, I'll agree, but it's not piss."

Daisy said nothing, only stared intensely at Keira. Keira in turn stared at the water's surface. It really did smell vile, she thought. Not quite the rank humor of ammonia but chemical, still. Acrid and of the earth, but not earthy in the way of good, rich loam; more rancid like the blue-and-white sub-layers of Wealden clay. She breathed in a couple of long, deep lungfuls, trying to identify that elusive odor.

When her senses shimmered at their edges and she began to feel disorientated, Keira put a hand against the rock to steady herself, and closed her eyes. "Maybe it's ammonia?" She looked back at Daisy and everything seemed to slide. She blinked several times as her companion's features wavered, like a dream segue in a 1970s television drama. She tried to stand, but her knees and ankles lacked substance.

"How are you feeling?" Daisy asked.

Keira shook her head and pulled the neck of her T-shirt over her nose to filter the air, waiting until the giddiness subsided before she opened her eyes and looked at the water. She blinked three or four more times and shook her head, trying to dislodge the fresh hallucination. The unmistakable shape of a face was coming into view—young, slender, and pale. Its rise was quick and fluid. Startlingly real as it broke the surface, so achingly beautiful that in her addled state Keira was momentarily frozen in complete awe.

Then the creature grinned, and a rack of jagged teeth seemed

to sever the face almost in half.

Keira felt a hand on her back, which became a shove, forcing her toward the vision. She reared back feebly against the pressure, struggling for balance. But Daisy had grabbed her by the back of her neck and shoulder, and with senses disorientated by the vapors, Keira could not resist the pressure that forced her down toward the water.

The creature reached out to greet her with hands that were slender and elegant and porcelain pale. Keira felt its fingers, cool and unblemished as Grecian marble, brush her face. Then the fight or flight response took hold in the face of tooth-filled jaws, which had elongated, widened, deepened.

Fear sluiced an adrenaline surge through to her veins, and Keira lurched backward. The back of her head ground against Daisy's teeth, echoing in her skull like a roar of thunder. She pulled one leg up, and shoved with every muscle she owned, and both women staggered backward, clanging against the railings in a tangled mass.

The monster filled the cleft in the rock and began to emerge into the open. It paused to gaze at the young rangers, a grimace shaping its lips; and those ice-blue eyes seemed amused, curious. Thick coils of dark hair streamed from its crown like a living shawl. It was naked and appeared fragile in its slenderness; androgynous and beautiful beyond anything Keira had ever seen.

The creature tilted its head and the humor left those dark, rounded eyes. Its puzzlement now bordered on impatience.

Keira pulled herself to her feet, drawing strength from the iron bars at her back though her legs still felt disconnected from the rest of her body. She managed a sideways step.

Daisy's hands grappled for her ankles. The woman's animalistic howls did not contain words that made sense in Keira's fuddled mind, but the rage was unmistakable. She kicked hard, the heel of her Doc Martens connecting with the ranger's temple, and Daisy rolled back, clasping both arms around her head.

The knucker was silent and watchful all of this time, and Keira was aware of an all-enveloping urge to stagger toward the serpentine form and to not run away; to greet it with open arms and her bared throat. She fought it; her every instinct screaming at her to take flight.

"A wyrm?" she bellowed at Daisy. "A frigging knucker? You knew!"

The monster paused at the name, its human features reemerging briefly as it contemplated first one woman and then the other.

"So I knew? I know a lot of things." Daisy lunged at Keira's legs.

Keira kicked out once again, and her boot connected with the woman's jaw. The impact jarred her knee and she heard the brutal crack, then Daisy's scream that broke the last vestiges of any hold over Keira's senses. Her right hand found the clear space of the open gateway and she swung herself around the post.

The creature surged forward, propelling itself on hands and pushing with its coiled sinewy extremity; it was long and limbless, and far darker than the upper body. Squeezing through the gap in the rock formation, it paused over Daisy's prostrate body—and then, as its reptilian jaws lunged downward, Daisy's howls were cut off abruptly.

Keira turned and she ran. No time to shut the gate or refasten the padlocks, she just turned and ran. Blundering through the bracken, stumbling as a bramble dragged at her legs, and praying she would not fall. She put everything she had into a surge of speed and leaped across the ancient ditch to sprawl on the grass, gasping for breath, certain that the knucker would crash into the open behind her at any moment. She was aware of a rush of movement, and of trees springing apart and closing in a shower of leaves and twigs, somewhere behind her.

Nothing emerged.

Keira rolled over and stared at the tree ring, scanning it for the

slightest movement. Her logical brain told her what had happened inside the fort was impossible. Daisy would come tripping out of the trees at any moment, giggling at whatever illusion she had created to pull a class-A gag.

A bestial howl from somewhere within the ring brought her staggering to her feet before the echo had ended, and then she was running down the hill—baked, chalky turf hard under her feet.

She had drawn almost level with the dew pond when its static waters began to boil and the knucker fountained up from its center. It powered across the pool toward her without a pause, churning the surface with rapid thrashing of its serpentine body, and barreled through gates that Daisy had not locked behind her.

The knucker's long iridescent muzzle, crammed full of teeth, came at Keira faster than her panicking brain could comprehend. She could only run, all the time expecting fangs to rip into the back of her head.

She knew she could not outpace it and looked around for a weapon as she ran. The only thing to hand was a garbage bin fastened to a post alongside the track, overflowing with discarded picnic remains, cans and bottles, and poop bags. She skittered to a halt and flicked up the lid and yanked out the metal inner-can. As the knucker roared at her, its jaws wide, she rammed the bucket into its gaping mouth. It reeled away, choking and gagging. Keira loped down the track, arms windmilling, lungs gulping air inward and screaming it out.

She stopped when she reached the roadside, hands on knees as she fought for breath. A white van whooshing past her and the overhead sound of gulls intent on their unending search for food were blessedly normal. She stood slowly and turned around. Nothing moved on the hillside above her. No sign of the creature she had grappled with, and hardly believing that she could have fended it off with a bin full of dog poop. There was no way she should have been able to outpace that thing, yet here she was, still in one piece and alone.

On the edge of the tree ring, an indistinct figure, half hidden in the shadows, was looking down at her. By instinct Keira reached for her cell phone. “Damn.” It was gone. Dropped somewhere in her flight. She took a single pace up the track and stared toward the pool. It looked as it always did, peaceable in the last rays of sun. And though Daisy had tried to sacrifice her to some prehistoric relic, a part of her felt she needed to go back to see what had happened to her colleague. A larger part of her really, really didn’t.

Keira held her pose, not daring to move; held it there for as long as the breath she’d held had lasted. Is that Daisy? she thought. Should I wait?

The shadowy figure withdrew, back into the trees. Keira made a dash for her car, the only vehicle in the car park a mere half dozen strides away. She scrambled in, locked the doors, jabbed the key around the ignition and failed to connect; jittery fingers refusing to obey.

She took a few long breaths and waited for her body to regain normality. Several vehicles sped past the car park entrance, lending solid reality and a vestigial sense of safety. None of them stopped. Several times she almost leaned on the horn, desperate for them to return; desperate for someone to notice what she had been through.

When her heart rate had slowed and blood began to flow back to her extremities, bringing the feeling back to fingers and feet, only then did she reach out with keys in hand. They slid into the ignition and she turned around to fasten her seat belt. As she started to turn the ignition there was a tap at her side window.

Keira spun toward the dark shape close to the door, and clasped her left hand to her chest as she recognized Jack Raffen. “Thank god . . . It’s only you.” She opened the window, finger still on the button ready to close at a moment’s notice. “Jack, something terrible . . .”

“Just clearing up,” he said. “And I found this.”

She took the iPhone handed to her through the window. Its screen was smashed, the casing mangled. Nothing would remain in its memory of Bolbury Down.

She stared at it, tracing the damage with her fingertips. “There was a thing,” she said. “Daisy . . . we have to call the police.”

“Why would that be?” Raffen’s face was artfully bland, a mask that gave nothing away.

“Daisy,” she whispered. “Because we need to find Daisy.”

Raffen allowed her one of his rare, lopsided smiles as he turned away, his last words lingering long after he had vanished into the dusk.

“Daisy? Daisy who?”

THE MISTAKE AT THE MONSOON PALACE

CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

Christopher Fowler is the multi-award-winning author of nearly fifty novels and short story collections, including the best-selling Bryant & May mysteries. His novels include *Roofworld*, *Spanky*, *Psychoville*, *Calabash*, and two volumes of memoirs, *Paperboy* (winner of the inaugural Green Carnation Prize) and *Film Freak*. In 2015 he won the CWA Dagger in the Library for his body of work. His latest novel is *Bryant & May: London Bridge is Falling Down*, which he claims is the last in the series, and he is working on a gigantic collection of *all* his short stories, provisionally entitled *Total Midnight*.

"The basis for this story is true," reveals the author, "and melds together several incidents that happened to me traveling across India. I met a rather paranoid lady from Texas who was dragging a huge Louis Vuitton suitcase filled with bottles of purified water around with her (a futile exercise when vegetables are rinsed in the river). She was so worried about being robbed that she slipped her diamond watch into a paper bag so that the

roadside kids wouldn't see, and then that was where her adventure began in my tale.

"Such palaces are real, of course, and I visited one in the rain where only monkeys and a few local kids went to swim, uneasily sharing this eerie space together."

ISKA KYADAAM HAL?

How much does this cost?

Marion Wilson gave up trying to memorize the phrases. She looked up from her guidebook, switching her attention to the driver. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said my cousin owns the best pashmina shop in Jaipur," Shere told her. "He will be honored to make you a special deal because you are my valued client."

Sure, she thought, *this guy is your cousin, your brother, your uncle, anyone other than some creep you cut deals with to rob rich, gullible Americans.* She impatiently tapped the guidebook with her forefinger, recalling the page about touts and conmen.

"I assure you, you will not find finer materials in all of India."

"Forget it, Shere, it's not going to happen," she told him. "Trust me, I bought enough stuff yesterday to fill an extra suitcase." In the three days that Shere had been appointed as her driver, they had visited jewelry stores selling silver bracelets that broke in half the first time you wore them, "handwoven" scarves produced by children in a Mumbai sweat-shop, and wooden statues of Ganesh that looked like they'd been speed-carved in the dark. "Let's get on, it's already ten."

"But Madam, this shop is of highest quality, government approved, everyone goes there, Richard Gere, everyone." The driver was wobbling his head amiably. "We stop for five minutes, no longer, and you do not have to buy if you do not wish."

"Well, I do *not* wish." She pulled a small plastic bottle of antiseptic wash from her trousers and poured a little of the blue

liquid into her hands. She had been touching rupees so soft and brown that they looked as if they'd been used for—she dreaded to think what. She silently repeated the hygiene rule; right hand for taking money and greeting, because here the left hand was used as a substitute for toilet paper. Not that she was as pernickety as some. Iris, her companion from Ohio, had arrived in Delhi with an entire suitcase full of bottled water, which was taking things a little too far.

The little white taxi nosed its way back out of the crowded market square toward the main road, a dusty two-lane highway filled with overladen trucks, hay carts, and sleeping cows. It was the end of the first week in July, and the monsoon season had yet to start, but the sky was dark with sinister cumulus. The ever-present pink mists that softened the views in every town they had visited had gone now, to be replaced by hot clear stillness. Marion wanted to open the window, to breathe something other than filtered freezing air, but could see black clouds of mosquitoes rising from ditches of dead water as the car passed.

Her attention drifted back to the guidebook, which had fallen open on a list of Indian gods. The text was accompanied by tiny pastel drawings, which made them all look the same. Bhairav. Ganesha. Hanuman. Rama. Shiva. Surya. Vishnu. Arrayed in lilac and yellow, blue and pink, they rode birds and bore swords, cups, fire, tridents, and bows, a vast network of deities who still seemed to hold some kind of power over the lives of ordinary people . . . she felt her eyes closing as the car swayed, and saw for a moment a bejeweled god lit by a curved prism of rubies and sapphires, spangling and spinning from his head. Feeling faint, she blinked the colors away.

She glanced up to the scenes rolling beyond the glass. Azure, crimson, and sunflower bolts of cloth were stacked on the dirty pavement like a disassembled rainbow. The traffic was detouring around a buffalo that stood in the middle of the road, patiently chewing a plastic bag. It wore a gold-trimmed dress, its horns

painted blue, its pierced ears laced with bells.

An ancient, bony man in a pink turban was squatting on the hard shoulder, cooking a chicken over an upright burning tire.

A motorized rickshaw overtook them with two children and a piebald goat wedged inside it.

An elephant driver was asleep in a faded red *houdah*, waiting for tourist coaches that would not arrive—the latest wave of terrorist bombings had seen to that.

A wedding band in yellow-and-silver uniforms were wearily donning the jackets they had dried on a row of thorn bushes.

A quartet of girls in identical yellow saris walked by, all listening to the same song on their mobile phones.

What do they think when they see me? Marion thought. *Do they even see me? Am I as invisible to them as they are in my country?*

What she first thought was a sparkling blue lake turned out to be a great ditch filled with empty plastic bottles.

"Where you want to go now?" the driver asked. Marion looked down at the guidebook in her lap and squinted at endless pages of forts and markets. Despite the low temperature in the vehicle, she felt overheated and fractious. She was still angry with Iris for deserting her five days into the trip. A few bouts of diarrhea and she was calling her husband, making arrangements to return home. The secret was to keep tackling the spicy food until your stomach adjusted, Marion had been told. *You've an iron constitution,* her father had always said, *you're made of stronger stuff than your mother. You just have too much imagination.*

The driver had pulled the car over to the side of the road, and was talking to two young men with old faces, nondescript Indians of the type you saw everywhere, skinny and serious to the point of appearing mournful, with side partings and brown sweaters and baggy suit trousers hiding thin legs. Most of the men seemed to do nothing but sit around drinking *chai* while the women wielded pickaxes in rubble-filled vacant lots.

She tried to listen in on the conversation but realized they were

speaking Hindi. “Who are these people?” she asked, leaning forward between the headrests.

“My brothers. They would like to get a lift. It is not far to their town.”

“I met your brothers three days ago, Shere, and these are not the same guys. You think everyone looks the same to foreigners? They don’t, not anymore. Those days are over. These guys are not your brothers and cannot come in the car, it’s out of the question. Besides, I thought we had to get to Jodhpur?”

“That is tomorrow. Today you may choose where you would like to go.”

To be honest, she was not entirely sure where they were going next. Everything on the itinerary sounded the same. She had picked it from four others on her travel agent’s website. According to the schedule, she was staying in an old maharajah’s palace, a vast amber fortress that looked like a child’s sandcastle in the photograph, now converted into a luxury hotel. She was tired of eating in ornate, deserted dining rooms. The only other tourists she had seen on the entire trip were a pair of elderly British ladies who seemed to be duplicating her trip town by town. Their reasons for coming to India mystified her, because she often overheard them sharply asking the waiters for poached eggs or sausages and toast, anything but Indian food.

She studied the arguing men from the window. Perhaps they were really his brothers. Everything here was designed to confuse, and everyone, it seemed, had the same first impressions: the colors, the mess, the filth, the lost grandeur, the blurred light, the beautiful children . . . part of her wanted to explore the narrow backstreets alone, but the touts and beggars were simply too exhausting, and Shere insisted on remaining by her side wherever she went. It was clearly considered too dangerous to let tourists explore for themselves. It seemed that they had to be brought in and unloaded, like boats being towed to docks.

But oh, the children. Tiny boys with withered feet or hands,

dragging themselves along the central reservation of the road on little carts, kohl-eyed girls balancing crying babies on their hips, boys twirling colored strings on their caps to attract attention or tapping with endless patience on the windows of idling cars, selling copies of *Vogue*, a grotesquely ironic choice of periodical to assign to a beggar. The country was a smashed mirror with some pieces reflecting the past, others the future. Between the tower blocks and tin-roofed slums, a Dickensian tapestry was being endlessly unpicked and rewoven, a world where nothing could be achieved without carbon papers and rubber stamps, where ten did the work of one and one the work of ten.

Shere crunched the gears and pulled away from the men in some anger, swinging into the traffic without looking, so that trucks and rickshaws had to swerve from his path. “So where do you want to go?” he asked, glancing at her in the mirror.

“I hadn’t really—”

My relationship with this man has changed over the past week, she thought, holding onto the door strap. *He’s so bored that he barely sees me. I thought I was in control, but now I wouldn’t be able to do anything without him, and the further we get away from tourist spots, the more I am forced to rely on his services. The drivers run everything here.*

“Could you turn the air conditioning down for a while?” She flapped the guidebook at her breast.

He looked horrified by the idea, but did as she requested. She tried to study the book as they bounced through a convoy of trucks painted the shades of children’s toys. Phrases swam up at her. “Once known as the Land of Death.” “Funeral pyres at dusk.” “Nausea, cramps, and exhaustion.” The pictures of the forts and palaces all looked the same; crenelated battlements, archways, turrets, and domes. She turned the page. *Singh Pohl Monsoon Palace.* An ochre pavilion, perfectly proportioned, overgrown, surrounded by sandstone walkways and set on a perfectly square lake, the green water so still that it mirrored the building,

doubling its size. She raised the book and pointed. “I think I’d like to go here.”

He looked over his shoulder and studied the directions impassively. “Forty-five kilometers, maybe more. It is not on our route.”

She read from the guidebook. *Vishnu, the most human of all gods, still haunts the forests around the Singh Pohl Palace. A flute, a peacock feather, and the color blue announce his presence. An earlier temple to the god Parjanya exists upon this site.*

“Yeah, that’s where I want to go.” A decision had been made. She could sleep for a while. Ted never came with her on vacations. He said he wanted to travel, but the truth was that he hated leaving the US, and complained so much when he did that he destroyed any pleasure in the trip. Ted was never around these days.

Her mouth was dry. Shere had provided iced water and hand towels for her, but she wanted something else. She had bought a bag of *pedas* and fruit candies studded with cardamom seeds in the market. They had the kind of sharply spiced flavors you would never find at home.

They passed a partially constructed motorway on which just two men were working, slowly raking gravel in a manner that spread it across each other’s paths, each undoing the other’s work. *How does anything run at all?* she wondered. *Over a billion people here, half of them shopkeepers selling nothing*.

Without the air conditioning she began to sweat. Her watch was gripping her wrist in a hot band, so she undid the clasp and dropped it in the bag at her feet. Pressing her head back into the rest, she studied the half-finished buildings of a small town slide by. Did no one ever think to finish one house before starting another, or to plan the roads and sidewalks in such a way that prevented people from considering them interchangeable?

She liked the markets, the running and fetching, the tumble and bustle and sheer connectedness of everything. No one seemed

to be entirely alone, no matter how poor they were. Everyone had some kind of support system. At home she and Ted barricaded themselves in their gated community, unlocked with an electronic key fob, and only saw the neighbors departing or arriving at holiday seasons. *If I needed help and couldn't get to the phone, I'd have to lie there until Ted got home*, she thought, *even assuming he was in town.*

The car screeched to a stop. In the road ahead, two half-starved dogs were fighting. One had buried its teeth in the other's left haunch. Loops of blood and spittle flecked the sidewalk as they rolled over each other. She opened the window an inch and the oppressive heat leaked in. Shere could not understand why his passenger was refusing the comfort of refrigerated air. *This place disgusts and frightens me*, she thought, *and yet I am drawn in. It makes me dream again.*

She was touring with three large pieces of Louis Vuitton luggage. The driver did not seem to think this unusual. He was probably used to the strange habits of Westerners, who toured as though they were moving house. Shere knew a place where they could stop for something to eat. A wall of oven-heat touched her as she stepped stiffly from the car. Ahead was a low white block in a bare, dusty yard. The straight road passed it, but there was nothing to see in either direction.

An ancient fiddle player witnessed her arrival, stood up and began to play a painful dirge until she had passed. The restaurant looked shut, but Shere waved her ahead.

"You don't want to come eat with me?" she asked.

"I have my own lunch." Shere smiled and wobbled his head in apology. As she approached the restaurant doors, she saw the lights flicker on in the dark interior. Waiters were scurrying to don their white coats. She ate butter chicken and Peshwari naan alone beside a window with cracked panes of plastic that had been stuffed with toilet paper to keep out the dust. The food was sensational, the bathroom after, horrific. She sat in the car with a

gurgling stomach as the roads grew dustier, browner, emptier. On the horizon, a line of wooded hills appeared. Finally, the road curved and climbed. It grew hotter and closer, until she felt as if she were suffocating.

"The rains are coming," he said, reading her thoughts, "maybe tonight."

"How much farther?" she asked, but received no reply. *I shouldn't have picked this place*, she admonished herself, *too far away, and even the driver doesn't seem to be sure of its whereabouts.*

They reached a string of small villages where everything glistened with marble dust. Outside every house and shop stood large carved statues of Hindu gods. Men sat cross-legged on their forecourts, chipping away at great white blocks from which the gods were slowly breaking free. She could differentiate some now; Ganesha, Hanuman, Brahma, Shakti, and Shiva, but the rest still looked the same. A guide had told her that there were over 330,000 to choose from. Who on earth bought these huge statues? They stood in rows like sentries on guard duty, ignored by children who probably found them as familiar as relatives.

A low brick wall—half finished, of course—ran around the edge of the town. She caught a glimpse of a sandstone building between the trees. "I think the palace is over there," said Shere. "My friend tells me the World Heritage people, they came to look, and were going to make it a site of special significance. Good for tourism. But they decided not to."

"Why?"

"Politics. I don't know."

"Any tourists here now?"

"No, none. Not since the bombings. This is a ghost palace. Nobody comes here at night. Only the spirits live here now. You will want to walk in the palace?"

"Yes, I think so."

"There is no guide for you."

Good, she thought, *I've had enough of standing in the heat*

listening to earnest men reeling off building statistics. "Do you have any more cold water I can take with me?"

"We can stop." He pulled up beside a small shop and purchased a bottle of water for her. While she waited in the car, a handful of children ran to the window and started tapping on the glass with distracted insistence. When she'd first arrived in the country, she had given all her small change to these hollow-eyed creatures, but the driver had stopped her, explaining that they were forced to pay their earnings back to gang-runners in the slums. After a few days she realized that her generosity could change nothing and would do nobody good in the long run.

Shere returned and they drove toward the palace. He swung the car off the main highway onto a back road, between tall dusty trees whose branches bent into arches from the weight of their own high leaves. A flock of green parrots blasted screeching into the air above them. Then there was only heat and silence.

She looked for a sign or a ticket booth, but there was nothing to mark the entrance to the palace. A single kitchen chair stood by a gap in the wall, where a guard usually sat. Drawn by the sound of the car, a few tiny children appeared, scampering toward her as they drew to a stop. Shere turned off the engine, then took a call on his cell.

One small boy remained against the wall, holding back from the group. He watched Marion with the kind of sad resignation one usually only saw in disappointed old men. When the boy realized that he had gained her attention, he pushed away from the wall and bunched his fingertips, gesturing to his mouth. Ignoring the others, she beckoned him over.

Her belongings were grouped around her on the back seat. She found the brown paper bag of candies and waited. His shyness surprised her. He seemed to be waiting for some kind of a sign. She realized she was frowning, and smiled instead.

He came a little nearer, then stopped. She held the sweets up against the window, remaining motionless. The other children saw

that she was not looking at them, and gradually dispersed. *I choose you*, she thought, *because you are trying hard not to look as if you care.*

Shere finished his phone call and turned to see what was happening.

The boy remained with his hands by his sides, studying her, as if trying to see a friendly spirit within. He cautiously approached, but two little girls remained at the window with their hands outstretched, blocking his way.

Marion handed them each a silver-wrapped sweet, then passed the bag through the window to the boy. Clutching it to his chest, his serious eyes briefly locked with hers, and he ran away. She watched him go with a vague sense of dissatisfaction. *What did you expect, that he would show gratitude?*

"You are ready to visit?"

"I'm ready," she sighed, feeling suddenly empty. "You don't have to come with me, I can find it."

"I can come with you." He didn't sound keen.

"It's fine, I have this. It's all I need." She held up the guide and tapped the cover, then slipped out of the car.

"I'll be here." Shere got out, opened her door, then took the opportunity to light a cigarette.

"I know you will. I won't be long."

Slipping the guide into her back pocket, she followed the overgrown path into the complex. Ahead, a family of white-haired monkeys with triangular black faces scattered at her approach. *Everyone's a part of something here*, she thought, *even the monkeys. I'd like to be part of something. Would Ted even notice if I didn't come back?* The incline to the palace was low but steady, and the heat was dense, tangible. Sweat formed on her face, in the small of her back. *Something must break soon*, she thought, *this is unbearable.*

The first building she reached was a pillared pavilion containing a bull shrine. The carved black bull was life-sized and kneeling, garlanded with artificial jasmine flowers, so perhaps the

villagers were still worshipping here. Beyond this, though, came disappointment. The lake had dried out, and appeared as a shallow rubble-strewn cavity in the ground, littered with plastic bottles. *Due to global warming*, she had read, *the shrinking monsoon season means that lakes and rivers all over India are drying up, many to vanish forever.*

The shattered remains of a pair of marble lions guarded the arched entrance to a platformed complex, and a tall Mughal swing had been placed by rooms that she knew would have once housed a harem. But the swing itself had fallen into disrepair, and the semiprecious gems that should have been inset in the arch had long ago been prized out by robbers. The main pavilion was complete, but in a sorry state. Instead of the smooth amber and ochre walls in the photographs, she found herself looking at colors that had faded and died to streaked grays and dirty browns. The inset mirrors and plaster carvings of the interior walls were ruined, and the ornate *jaali* screens were nowhere to be seen. Nothing was as it appeared in the guidebook. *Next time, buy a recent edition*, she reminded herself. *Like there'll be a next time. Ted wouldn't allow it again.*

Set at right angles to the pavilion was a structure raised on four great fluted plinths, each beset by a pair of squat lotus urns, but the building did not look safe enough to enter. In the quadrangle formed by the buildings, bathing tanks and a complex network of stone gullies must once have been filled with water, but were now dried out and dead. She cupped her hands to shield out the sunlight, and looked to the roof, which was lined with terracotta pitchers. Somewhere in the woods beyond, a bird thrashed and screamed.

There were other buildings to explore, a small mosque with dried-out marigold garlands on its steps, a partially ruined tomb, but she did not have the energy to investigate them all. Outside the royal apartments, peacocks pecked at the sun-bleached ground. Clearly the villagers had been here, for the birds' tail

feathers had been plucked, presumably to sell at the market.

In the shadows of the tomb's canopy she saw a small seated figure, and immediately recognized the boy. *He's different to the others*, she thought, *quiet and more thoughtful.* Through the trees she could make out the far edge of the village. After studying the scene for a few more moments, she turned to make her way back. *If I had seen this ten days ago I'd have been more impressed, but I've walked through too many of them now. They're all the same. They lack life.*

She tore open a moist tissue and wiped her forehead. She found Shere leaning beside the car, smoking. Surprised by her fast return, he went to grind out the cigarette. "It's okay," she told him, "take your time."

She opened the passenger door and slid onto the back seat. The sun was still high. They had stopped early for lunch. Surely it could only be about two o'clock. She fished on the floor for the sweet bag containing her watch, then remembered that she had given the bag to the boy.

How could she have been so stupid? What had she been thinking? The watch had been a gift from Ted, solemnly presented in order to make amends for his behavior. The damned thing was encrusted with diamonds and worth around fourteen thousand dollars, even now. She had never really liked it, but that was less to do with its appearance and more because it represented an expensive apology. Over the years she had grown so blasé about wearing it that she had become careless.

The boy had been sitting in one of the temples in the palace. She had to go back and find him.

Shere caught her alarm. "Where are you going?"

"My watch. The boy." It was not an explanation, but all that she could manage right now. The monkeys scattered as she strode back up the path thinking, *Insurance, sales receipt, Ted, how will he ever be persuaded to give it back—*

As she approached the palace's large central pavilion, she

became aware of the change in light all around her. The gardens had lost the little color they possessed, darkening to olive, the walls deepening to camel-skin.

She crossed a cracked courtyard and climbed the palace platforms, peering through the stone latticework in search of the child. She had her purse; she would offer him rupees and have him return the watch. After all, what would he want with such a thing?

She became aware of a presence behind her, a tall figure bisected by shadows. She turned, startled, and found herself facing a huge stone statue of a god wearing a strange cloud crown. He was holding an eight-petalled plant in each hand. On the floor was a wooden plaque written in English. It read:

> *PARJANYA is the Old God of the Heavens. He rules lightning, thunder, and rain. He controls the procreation of plants and animals, but can also punish sinners. His powers are a mighty wonder to behold.*

She studied his wind-damaged face. A faint but defiant smile played on his lips, as if he wished to play a game, or be challenged. As if he were waiting to show his strength. She shivered. A wind had risen. Dry leaves scuttled across the terrazzo floor. In the last few minutes a wall of rolling cloud had appeared on the horizon and was sliding across the sky like a steel shutter.

Stepping back from the statue, which seemed to be smiling at her in the half-light, she headed from one building to the next until she reached the sunken groves of the *charbargh*, the walled paradise garden divided into four quarters to represent the four parts of life, but the boy was nowhere to be found.

The only thing she could do now was persuade Shere to take her to the village and ask the shopkeepers if they had seen him, but already she sensed that they would unite behind the child and her mission would fail.

The first fat drop stained the dust at her feet like ink falling

from a pen nib. It made an audible *ploc* as it landed. A second, *tac*, hit the steps. Looking up, she saw that the clouds entirely covered the sky. Moments later the droplets multiplied by tens, hundreds, thousands, millions, from a shower to a roaring downpour, to a thunderous cascade, to a sound like the end of the world. Visibility dropped to zero and she stumbled up the steps into the open-sided pavilion, watching in wonder as rain unlike any she had ever seen deluged the palace.

At his car, Shere swore and threw down his cigarette as the first drops fell. He heard raised voices; a massive cheer of excitement filtered through the trees from the village. His client would already be soaked unless she had managed to take shelter. If she complained to the tour company, they would dock his pay, or worse, place him on a circuit where he could make no money from the shops and restaurants he recommended.

There was no point in looking for her; the uphill path was already turning into a mudslide. She would have to wait for a break and return as best she could.

A change was sweeping over the monsoon palace. The dried-out walls had blossomed into bright ambers, ochres, and fiery reds. Tiles were washed of their dust to reveal fierce blue glaze beneath. Mosaic panels covered with geometric lapis motifs sprouted and bloomed like orchids, glistening ornamental patterns emerging on the *chhatris* of the pavilions. Gray walls revealed hidden blues, yellows, and greens. Earth was washed from the courtyard to reveal a polished marble floor inlaid with designs: floral bouquets, fruit trees, and wine decanters. The gutters filled with rivulets that became gurgling streams, then pounding torrents, water shooting out of stonework spouts as the fountains sputtered into life. Marion grabbed the wet pages of the guidebook and searched for the pictures of the palace.

"*But it is the magic of the monsoon that restores the Palace*," she read, " *for this forgotten complex of sandstone buildings and gardens was created to activate special effects during the rainy season that*

would delight the Bharatpur kings. The palace's reservoirs are designed to fill instantly, fed by water steps that pump streams through pipes to the peacock fountains."

Following the guide's floor plan, she looked straight ahead and saw that what she had mistaken for piles of pale stones were in fact great marble peacocks. Rain was rushing down the steep gullies to be forced into the narrow stone pipes surrounding the birds. Water gushed from behind their long necks in shimmering rainbow fans, perfectly replicating the bird's plumage. Marion was stunned. All about her, pipes and pillars were spouting water shapes, birds, animals, flowers. The pavilion's overhanging balconies and kiosks channeled rain into intricate patterns that held formation for a moment before breaking apart and falling to earth.

The palace had been built to provide royal delight during the monsoon. It needed heavy rain to come alive. Water swelled and saturated the parched earth and the arched halls around her, filling them with color and vigor. She walked, then ran through the white cascades between the inundated pools and reservoirs.

A long low belch of thunder sounded from somewhere between the ground and the clouds. Looking to the roof of the opposite pavilion, she saw a series of heavy lithic balls forced by sprays and jets of water to roll slowly across the concave roof, then back from the far side, artificially producing the sounds of a storm. The ditches around her were filling fast. Shielded from the downpour, they formed graceful mirror geometries that reflected the falling rain. She looked to where she had last seen the boy sitting. The curiously curved roof of the tomb now made sense; its upturned reflection was that of a boat, ferrying its precious cargo to safety.

She was crying uncontrollably now, tears pouring down her cheeks in an unstoppable flow. Her white shirt was stuck to her shoulders, her breasts. She fought the urge to tear the transparent material from her body and wade into the lake. A sense of understanding flooded through her, filling her with compassion.

She no longer cared about her watch, her luggage, her husband, her home. The trappings of her life had vanished in the revelation of the tempest. Unashamed of crying or calling to the gods, her voice joined the thousands of others who celebrated the coming of the monsoon.

THE BOY SPLASHED through the streets with the paper bag clutched in his fist, and found his uncle closing because of the rains. Uncle Javed's decision to delay the repairs to his roof would cost him dearly. Later on this very night, part of the shop's ceiling would fall in and ruin his new stock of winter jackets and saris.

The boy showed his uncle the watch, and received a clip across the ear for his trouble. "Oh Karan, you will cause your mother to die of despair," he scolded, "for producing another little thief like your brother. Hasn't the poor woman had enough trouble in her miserable life? Why do you want to see her suffer further?"

"I didn't steal it," Karan insisted. "A rich American lady opened the window of her car and handed it to me."

"Such a little liar!" Uncle Javed cried, trying to seize the boy's thin neck. "What kind of monster have we raised that he should steal from the very people who come here in trust? Was she very rich?"

"You steal from them all the time," said Karan, stepping back from his uncle's grabbing hands, "every time you sell them a shawl and tell them it was sewn by a lady who took twenty months to make it all by hand."

"That is the art of business, you rude child. Every woman wants to be told the story behind her purchase, in order to make it more of a bargain."

"But your stories aren't true."

"They are exactly what people wish to believe. Price has nothing to do with value. And this—" he held the glittering watch aloft, "—must go back to the tourist you stole it from."

“But I’m sure she has gone.”

“Did you look for her?”

“No.”

“Well, that is a blessing. My heart aches to think of the trouble you would have caused by making her think you were a thief. Come on, we have to visit old Mister Chauhan. He will be able to tell us how much the watch is worth. We must know how big a thief you have become, in order to find the right penance for your sin.”

Karan reluctantly agreed to go along, but first he made sure that Uncle Javed returned the bag to him.

The boys in the village said that Mister Chauhan was about five hundred years old, and had once been introduced to Queen Victoria in Old Bombay. His skin was so wrinkled, it looked to Karan as if someone had magically transferred his features to a brown paper bag, then screwed the bag up and flattened it out imperfectly. Mister Chauhan owned a brass-rimmed magnifying glass the size of a hotel dinner plate. He raised it by a pair of horn handles and held it over the watch on his cluttered desk. For several minutes there was complete silence in the cramped antique shop. Finally he set down the glass and turned to the boy.

“There are thirty-six diamonds of extremely high quality inside this watch casing, but there is also something missing.”

“Missing?” Uncle Javed looked at his nephew in puzzlement.

“No serial number,” said Mister Chauhan. “On Cartier watches of this type, there are two types of authentication. On the downward stroke of the Roman numeral seven, one can see, with the aid of a strong magnifier, the word *Cartier* written in script. That is one sign. The other is the serial number on the back of the casing, but there is none.”

“So typical that my thieving nephew should choose to steal a worthless fake,” Uncle Javed complained, giving the boy another clip around the ear.

“I did not say it was a fake,” Mister Chauhan continued. “This

watch is very genuine indeed. It is extremely rare, so rare that someone has erased the number to prevent it from being traced. Every Cartier can be traced by its number."

"Why would somebody remove it?" asked Uncle Javed.

Uncle Chauhan sucked his teeth and thought for a moment. "I can think of two very good reasons. Either the person who bought it did not wish it to be found, because he made the purchase with bad money."

"He avoids his taxes. He is a crook."

"Something like that."

"What is the other reason?"

"A man might make such a purchase for his mistress, whose name he does not wish to be recorded on papers as the watch's owner."

"The lady was not a mistress," said Karan, "she was a wife."

"Then perhaps her husband repents and gives the watch he buys his mistress to his wife, after first taking the precautionary measure of removing the serial number."

Uncle Javed looked as if he had just seen a fortune fly out of the window.

"Mister Chauhan, you make a fine storyteller," laughed Karan. "If I did not know you better, I might be tempted to think that you were inventing such a marvelous story so that I might agree to sell it for a small amount."

"The watch cannot be repaired or serviced by Cartier," Mister Chauhan explained. "And this is the very thing that any prospective buyer would want."

But even as he looked into the boy's unblinking brown eyes, Mister Chauhan knew he had lost. For this was India, where the past was not important, and anything could be repaired. He sighed and ordered the *chai* to be brewed, knowing that it would be a long evening. The bargaining began in earnest. Karan had seen the greedy fire in Mister Chauhan's eyes, and knew that the process of negotiation would be lengthy and arduous.

In fact, the formalities took three days and involved one boy and five men from two villages. Part of the problem was that the arrangement had to be kept away from the knowledge of the local police constabulary in order to avoid an unacceptable level of commission being deducted from the sale. At the conclusion of the deal much money was assembled, assurances were written out, whisky and *masala* tea was poured, everyone involved was sworn to silence, and Karan rode the train to Bangalore, to begin a new life.

Shere Banjara, the driver for Jacaranda Tours, fifty-two years old and married with five children, was severely reprimanded and fined for the loss of his charge. The paperwork involved took over a year to sort out. Finally he was moved from his base in Delhi to Kolkata, where he quickly learned that the new circuit could reap him unexpected rewards from a fresh generation of middle-class businessmen looking to buy carpets and tapestries for their second homes.

AS THE YEARS passed, the dry and rainy seasons replaced each other like cards falling upon a gaming table. The monsoon palace was denied World Heritage status due to a dispute over the ownership of its land, and remained overgrown and forgotten by all except the monkeys, doves, and peacocks, who lived within its evening shadows. Parjanya sat in the dusty shadows and bided his time.

Then, one overheated day, just before the arrival of the monsoon, when the air was so scorched that it felt like you might carve a hole in it to breathe, some workers angrily threw their pickaxes and shovels down onto the hard dry soil and started shouting at one another.

“What the bloody hell is going on here?” asked the project foreman, striding over. Work had fallen behind, and it was starting to look as if they would not be finished before the rains came, which would be disastrous because the road had not yet been

sealed and they needed to take the shack down now.

"The villagers tell us we cannot remove Maran or we will bring bad luck to the area," said one of the workmen. "We need to dismantle any obstacle today."

"Wait, you are talking about this? *This?*" The foreman pointed to the chaotic arrangement of tin huts that stood in their path and began to laugh. "Bulldoze it flat. Pass me a pickax and I'll do it myself." He spat *paan* on the ground dismissively.

"You don't understand. A promise was made that Maran would never be moved."

"Who was this promise made to?"

"An old man called Javed who lived in the village."

"Javed? That scoundrel? He has been dead for over five years! The past is the past. Knock it down."

The workmen reluctantly moved toward their tools, but before they could continue their work, a horn sounded and they were forced to move to the sides of the road to allow for the arrival of a white Mercedes. Everyone agreed that the man who emerged from the rear seat looked like a younger version of Shah Rukh Khan, the Bollywood superstar. He walked over to the tin huts, examined them, and beckoned the foreman.

"How far over the boundary line?"

The foreman looked at the ground and thought. "Twenty feet, at least."

"You know how long Maran has lived here?"

"The men tell me fifteen years."

"Sixteen. You know why?"

"Something to do with guarding the palace and keeping it in good repair, but there's no paperwork—"

"You don't need paperwork for everything. Let me deal with this." As he approached the huts, a pair of green parrots screamed and rocked the ornate wire cage that hung from the lintel above the front door. He tapped respectfully and stepped back, waiting.

The gray-haired woman who appeared in the doorway studied

her visitor and smiled. “Come inside,” she instructed. “I wasn’t sure if you would get here in time. The *chai* is almost ready. I’ve learned to like it sweet. I never took sugar at home. Have that chair in the corner, but be careful, the leg is broken.”

The interior of the hut was crowded with decorative ornaments that had been presented to her by the villagers over the years, mostly Hindu gods. “Let me look at you.”

Karan adjusted his collar and slicked back his hair, ready for inspection. “I did not believe you would stay, Maran.”

“Marion,” she corrected. “Oh, I come from a long line of very determined women. Besides, if I deserted my palace, who else would do the job? You people are losing respect for your past, all this rushing toward the future.”

“And ‘you people’ have not done the same?” asked Karan. “This is not your palace. It is not a cause you can simply adopt, like a child.”

In the soft light Marion looked younger than her years, the way she had been when he first saw her. “You’re right, of course. I can’t explain what I feel. But I know you can’t take his land.” She touched her bare tanned neck, remembering. “I wanted to look nice for you but the damned monkey took my necklace. He’s probably buried it out by the *jharna*.”

“The gardens of the monsoon palace have never been accurately measured, you know. We could go beyond their walls right now, trim a hundred yards off, and no one would ever know.”

“Shame on you, to even think of such a thing. He will know. Parjanya will know.”

“I have no other choice. But you, do you really want to stay on here?”

“I have no other choice either. I burned my bridges long ago.”

“Where is your husband?”

“Maybe he stayed with his mistress,” she said carelessly. “I wrote him some letters. I don’t know if he got them.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, I’m not. I’ll become like the old British ladies who still live on in Delhi, complaining about their landlords and going slowly crazy. Something about this place encourages the irrational . . .”

“I could move you back into the village. Javed’s children have offered you a home.”

“No,” she said firmly, “I need to be within sight of the pavilion. I’ve seen the designs for your little housing project, Karan. A gated community? I stayed here to get away from such things. Don’t tell me it’s progress, because it’s nothing of the kind.”

“It’s what people want.” Karan smiled. “Didn’t you know, we’re all middle class now, even if our castes can never change.”

“Well, it seems to me that we have to strike a deal, but I have no cards to play. Are you hungry? I could make you some *paneer*.”

“No, I had a pizza.”

“You could have me thrown off the site tonight, if that’s what you want.”

“I could, but you know I would never do it.” He sipped his *masala*.

“You make this better than my mother used to. So, this is what we’ll do. You stay here. I’ll shift the boundary back, everyone’s happy.”

“Everyone except Parjanya.”

“It is the only solution I can offer.”

“It sounds like you already had that in mind. You can’t do it without changing the planning application, can you?”

“I can change the application with a few handfuls of rupees. We need to reduce the size of the estate because the surveyors are arriving from Delhi next week.”

“It’s a shame. I thought the monsoon palace would eventually be accepted as a World Heritage site. Now, more than ever, Parjanya needs a guardian here.” Marion laughed softly to herself.

“What is funny?” Karan asked.

“I was foolish enough to think that such an ancient, magnificent monument might be saved by a bag of sweets,” she replied.

“The palace will be protected, but the condition is the partial surrender of its grounds,” said Karan.

“He will not let you take his land,” she said simply.

“Listen, Marion, I have respect for you, but you cannot change what must be done.” Enough. She exasperated him. Karan rose and took his leave. Outside, as he spoke to his foreman, she imagined the desiccated ground receiving fat drops of quenching rain.

The men moved in. The yellow bulldozers and earthmovers backed away from the hut, but surged toward the low drystone walls and pushed straight through them, gouging channels in the soft red earth. The workmen marched forward behind the vehicles, an advancing army clad in bright protective jackets.

Marion stood in the doorway and watched, smiling to herself.

They cannot steal the land you have protected for me, Parjanya hissed in her ear. *They are arrogant enough to think that their machines will make a difference, but they forget I control the Heavens.*

Parjanya made the rains come. She looked up into the sky and saw it cloud over within a few seconds. The first bolt of lightning split the air and hit the cabin of the lead earthmover. A scream came from within. Men swarmed around the stalled vehicle as smoke billowed from its electrics.

It was the heaviest monsoon squall she had ever witnessed. The rain increased until nothing could be discerned from the door of the hut. She heard the ominous rumble of wet earth as a torrent of mud poured over the broken walls, punching the workmen’s legs from under them, swallowing them in thick brown effluvium. The men were all choked and drowned, or were crushed and buried. Their machines were overturned on top of them, hammering them flat, bursting their soft shells into the bubbling cauldron of mud. The monkeys stared out from the shelter of the palace, hooting in

triumph. Soon the mud would dry again and it would be as if the workmen were never here.

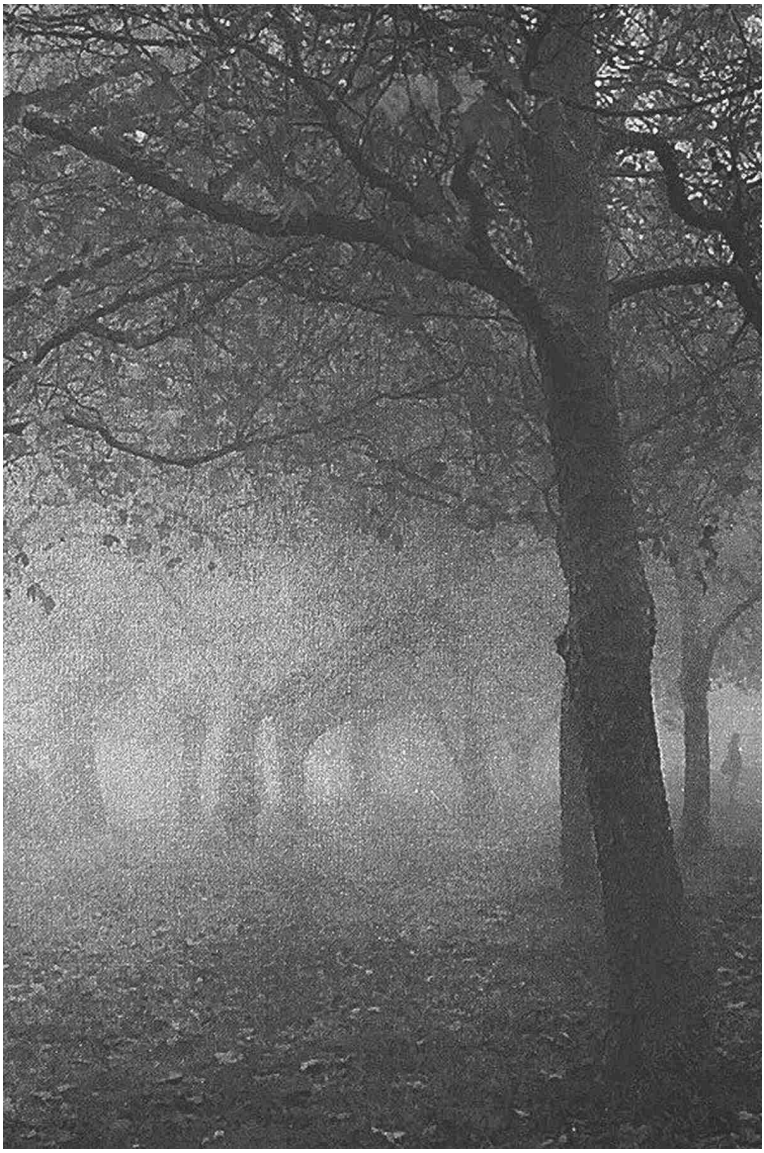
A beatific smile crept over Marion's face as she returned to make fresh tea.

Karan unknotted his tie and fanned himself in the blast-furnace heat. He watched Marion slowly retreat into the shadows, lost inside her visions. One of the workmen jammed his shovel into the hard dry earth, leaned back and caught his eye, grinning knowingly. *Pāgala aurata.* Crazy lady.

Karan wondered what was going through Marion's head. It was a funny thing about those who came to stay; the ones who didn't believe often ended up believing a little too much.

Let her keep her dreams, he thought. *I'll only take eighty yards from the garden. No one will notice. If they ask, I'll tell them it was a mistake.*

Somewhere in the dense treetops behind him, the first cool breezes rose.



WYFA MEDJ

STORM CONSTANTINE

Storm Constantine (1956–2021) was writing stories since she was a small child and first went to school. Before that, she made them up in her head. The first of her groundbreaking Wraeththu trilogy, *The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit*, was published in 1987, and it was followed by more than thirty other books—both fiction and nonfiction—as well as over one hundred short stories.

In 2003, she founded Immanion Press in order to bring her back-catalog novels (and those of writing friends) back into print. The imprint expanded and thrived, going on to publish new works and an extensive esoteric nonfiction list in Megalithica Books. Her most recently published titles include *Coming Forth by Day,* a book on Ancient Egyptian magic, and *Breathe, My Shadow*, a standalone novel set in her Wraeththu Mythos.

As an author, Constantine always sought to cross genre boundaries, and she regarded the shaping of language in fiction as a kind of poetry, with its own beauty and rhythm.

“The inspirations for ‘Wyfa Medj’ came from myths of the ‘cunning people,’” she revealed, “those who were thought to have magical powers, and who often provided

healing for their community, as well as assisting with those most fundamental rites of passage—birth and death.

"In particular, the Sardinian legend of L'accabadora gave me ideas for the story. Perhaps, in remote areas of Europe, the wise women are still at work, providing their timeless services—people to be revered . . . and sometimes feared."

SHE CAME OUT of the winter woods. I saw her, barely more than a shadow, a glimpse at the edge of vision. Clad in brown and black, lashing the dead bracken with a stick. One moment the woods were quiet, empty of life, the next she was there.

Of course, I turned around and hurried away. Wish I hadn't. Wish I'd had the courage to stay, to make sure she was *really* there and not just imagined. But when faced with the impossible, something *unbelonging* to this world, the human organism's first instinct is to flee, to hide.

I DIDN'T TELL anyone about it.

I was staying with my cousin Nettie—a week's holiday at the end of January; the wild woodland of Owltuck Chase lay bleak around her isolated home. She and her husband, Ban, called their place a cottage, but to me a house with five bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a games room is something more than that. Its name is "Willa's Tump," which Nettie had explained to me meant "protective trees or bushes" from very old English.

"Enjoy your walk?" Nettie asked, as I came into the kitchen on the first Saturday morning of my visit. I'd arrived late the night before. Nettie stood at the immense black range, stirring a cauldron of soup she'd made.

I took off my coat, removed my hat and gloves, unwound my

scarf. “Yeah, bit gloomy out there at this time of year, though.”

“Oh, I love the woods in all their seasons,” Nettie said, sprinkling herbs into the bubbling vat. “There’s beauty even in the barren times. Holly berries, a burst of blood in the darkness.” She smiled wryly. “Oh, there’s my writer’s head at work again!”

I smiled. “I find it dreary and spooky rather than beautiful. I’m clearly too much of a townie.”

“Don’t be silly. A true townie would feel nothing. Not too early for a gin, is it?”

“Never too early.” I sat down at the table.

Nettie is a red-headed beauty, bohemian and creative. She writes and illustrates children’s books on the strange and spooky. To me, she’s always been perfect. Her husband, Ban, is lovely too, in the literal sense; slim and rangy, with abundant, naturally streaky fair hair—rather like an Afghan hound, I always thought. Both are fit and vibrant, wise and lithe. To be envied. Little Bram, their son, however, is perhaps the cost for their perfection. He’s never been truly well. While he shares their beauty genes, he’s sickly, and even at six years old prone to a kind of depression. Perhaps it depresses him to compare himself to his shining parents. Sometimes he’s distant, but at most times sweet. To love him is to experience a dart of pain, right through the heart. You can’t help but love him. To the old souls of Nettie and Ban came an old-soul offspring, but the vehicle was faulty. Bram was born in this house.

It’s a pleasure to stay in Willa’s Tump. The building’s atmosphere caresses the senses, its appointments embrace the body. The place is serene, unhaunted, even for a house so far from anyone else, so close to the old forest, where the trees lean toward the walls, as if seeking their warmth.

Nettie is into ghosts and psychism and all that stuff, yet that day I shrank from telling her what I thought I’d seen. I didn’t fear mockery. I don’t know what I feared.

THAT NIGHT I dreamed of her, the woman of the woods. The dream added more detail, perhaps imagined rather than recalled. She wore a wide-brimmed felt hat, which was runkled as if it had been soaked then dried too quickly. Her coat was long and shapeless, and necklaces hung outside it. Beads of dried berries and shaped bone. Her staff was stout with a crosspiece for a handle. This didn't look attached but part of the staff itself, perhaps a tree branch whittled into shape. I couldn't see her face. She simply smashed her way through the detritus of the fallen year, as if she were some earthy goddess clearing a path for new growth. I wasn't afraid of her in the dream, because I was aware I was dreaming. She didn't notice me, in any case. Smashed right by me. I heard her breathing but couldn't tell if she was young or old—or ageless.

THE NEXT DAY Nettie and Ban wanted us to have breakfast at a new farm shop café that had opened up a few miles away. The food was locally sourced and ethically spotless. Bram came with us, wrapped up warm against the elements but nevertheless forever blowing his nose and coughing. His colds seemed perpetual.

We drove through the woods, me sitting with Bram in the back of the SUV. He played half-heartedly on a tablet, snuffling in an unpleasantly thick, liquid way. Nettie kept telling him to use a handkerchief. He did so, now and again.

The farm shop named "Cobbles" was situated next to a canal at the edge of the forest. Even on this cold Sunday morning, the tables covering the wide area of decking that overlooked the water were full of people. But then the sun was shining; it was the best of winter days. The inside of the place was relatively empty. The walls were decorated with huge framed prints, copies of very early maps, embellished to provide details for the curious.

While Nettie arranged Bram and her belongings at a table, and Ban went to order breakfast, I examined a map depicting the land where my cousin lived. As well as pointing out little-known

features of the landscape, the map was embellished with notes about local folklore. I saw that the forest was a maze of little tracks, some of them perhaps ancient highroads.

One of them was named "Withwyf Path." A bubble of text attached by a line to this spot explained the possible meaning of the name. Way back when Middle English was the language of the land, from around the twelfth to the sixteenth century, the term *midwife* meant literally "with woman"—the woman who is with you—and this pertained to those who attended births to assist the mother. *Wife* in those times was simply the archaic word for a woman, and I thought how amazing it was the term *midwife* had survived to modern day. I'd had no idea of its earliest meaning, believing the *mid* must stand for "midway between" or something similar.

The explanatory text suggested that a local woman who had once had the role of midwife in the community might either have lived in the woods or walked through them on her way to various impending births around the area. The path had only been discovered on an ancient map whose creator had sought to record the old names for all the fields and paths. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, the path in the forest appeared to have had no name at all, eventually sinking down into a tiny track, forgotten and mostly hidden. I thought, of course, of the woman I'd seen in the woods the day before. She'd hardly had the look of a midwife though. I still felt strange about what I'd seen.

As I gazed at the map, reading the wonderful old names of the fields—Bleak's Wide, John's Acre, and Widow's Mile—and copses such a Fox Weald, Birch Holt, and Devil's Hat—I found myself mourning the passing of the landscape and all its corners and mysteries, untrodden and wild. Now, woodlands are an endangered species, conservation of their flora and fauna a worry, while the remaining unhedged fields are wide, blank swaths like enormous wounds across the land, and they have no names.

I remembered then a place from childhood—a farm Nettie and

I used to visit, because our parents were friends of the farming family. Even then, many fields still had dips within them, containing pools that were hidden from above, where cattle and sheep might drink, shadowed by trees. James, the farmer's son, who sometimes joined Nettie and I in our adventures, told us these places were called vernal ponds, because they had the most water in springtime. We'd run free over the land, playing in a world of make-believe, and I recalled the strange, still atmosphere of the pond in the home field near the farmhouse. It felt enchanted to me. There were no fish in the pond, but newts and frogs bred there. The old willows around it craned toward the water, as if they were dryads washing their hair. The water wasn't deep, and even in the center sunlight reached right to the bottom.

Remembering all this, staring at the map, my wistfulness hardened into a kind of impotent rage. I grieved for the old landscape, so swiftly vanishing beneath featureless intense farming, scabbed with expanding concrete as the suburbs spread like a disease.

"Elphie!" Ban called to me.

Breakfast was ready.

BRAM DIDN'T EAT much and looked miserable. Nettie tried to cajole him. She was always determinedly positive about his condition, as if giving in to it would make things worse. This attitude also helped repel awkward questions.

Bram grimaced and turned away from the buttery scrambled egg she offered him. He seemed that morning to exude a sour smell of sickness that made even the aroma of farm shop butter seem rancid.

Eventually, Nettie put down the fork with which she was attempting to feed her son and began to eat her own breakfast.

“Try and eat something, sweetie,” she said to Bram.

He nodded gravely and started to nibble at a slice of toast but without any apparent enjoyment.

Ban sat reading a Sunday newspaper he’d picked up from a table by the door.

To cover a faint uneasiness around the table, I began to talk about the maps, the strange old names on them. “It makes me angry to think of how so many features of the landscape have disappeared and how more will do so. I just hope I’m long gone when the day comes around there’s nothing left at all.”

Nettie smiled at me. “The old earth is tougher than you think,” she said, “and perhaps patient. If there’s only one copse of trees left of an ancient forest, it holds the memory of the whole. And if it comes down to only to one bush, that bush will remember, its seeds will scatter.”

That was typical of Nettie. I couldn’t share her optimism.

“Still, it’s a shame,” I said, somewhat weakly.

AFTER BREAKFAST, WE went for a walk along the canal. To our left, colorful narrow boats were moored, many of them lived in all year round, others hired out for holidays. To the right, the plastic-covered greenhouses of the farm spread wide. They were full of crops people could pick themselves at various times of year that were in all ways organically grown, but for the ugly ribbed tubes that housed them.

Bram’s cough became so severe we had to cut our walk short. Ban carried his son back to the car, while Nettie and I walked a couple of paces behind.

I felt I had to say something about Bram’s condition, because Nettie never did. In her silence, it was as if she challenged people to dare to say her son was terribly unwell. Yet now it seemed ridiculous not to mention it, because the reality of it was so glaring. “Do they know what’s wrong with him?” I asked

tentatively.

"*They?*" Nettie inquired sharply, a tone unusual for her.

"Well, doctors . . . you know."

"It's the way he was born," Nettie said, her voice becoming sterner. "We manage the situation. We don't need so-called health professionals inflicting labels on him and filling him full of drugs. They're just one step up from the men who saw off the wise women, those phenomenal people who once cared for their local communities. Modern medicine is often no better than applying leeches. Bodies are merely regarded as identical machines to the medical industry. We're not living souls to them, all of us different. *Doctors* don't know as much as they like to think they do." She pursed her lips, shook her head.

There was a hard silence I had no idea how to fill.

Then Ban glanced round at us and said, "He's had all the tests," as if sensing what I might be thinking, although actually I had no judgment of Nettie's stance. I did realize, though, that the three of us were speaking as if Bram wasn't there or was incapable of understanding. He didn't say anything, his head resting on his father's shoulder, his eyes closed.

Nettie took my arm, squeezed it. "Don't worry," she said, her tone once more serene. She slowed our pace a little. "We do what's best for Bram."

"Will he ever get better?" I asked softly, because I really wanted to know. We were far enough from Ban and Bram now for the boy not to hear.

"We take each day as it comes," Nettie said. "Don't think me some weirdo that believes the angels will cure him or something. We did do all the medical stuff, but eventually we took the decision to stop. It became more like torture than treatment. So . . ." She squeezed my arm again. "There's no point being sad, Elph, because that doesn't help him either. We just have to . . . love him . . . do what we can—and there *are* things we do to help him live as normal a life as possible."

“We never talk about it,” I said. “I don’t want you to think I don’t care. I do. I just feel helpless.”

“I know,” Nettie said and leaned over to kiss my cheek.

BACK AT WILLA’S Tump, Nettie laid Bram on the sofa and covered him with a soft, fringed blanket. She sat beside him, stroking his face, and he stared up at her, his expression strangely disinterested. Ban had driven off to a supermarket some miles away.

I felt uncomfortable, almost like an intruder. “Can I do anything?” I asked. “Make a drink?”

Nettie stood up. “No, I’ll make Bram his drink. You continue your walk. It’s partly what you’re here for, isn’t it?” She smiled. “Fresh air, walking in the woods. Be happy out there; the Chase isn’t going anywhere. It’s well protected!”

I smiled back. “Okay. See you later, then.”

Although I was apprehensive about revisiting the part of the woods where I’d seen the peculiar woman, my feet felt differently and led me toward the old trackway of Withwyf Path. I wondered if yesterday I’d glimpsed a scene from the past, one of the wise women Nettie had spoken of, who knew the secrets of plants and trees and the creatures of the land. If so, what was there to be scared of?

And yet, as I walked deeper into the forest, I felt increasingly unnerved. There was nothing peculiar to see or hear. The birds still sang. The sunlight streamed down. Yet I was tense. Was this because I was expecting to see the weird woman smashing around with her stick again? Must be, I thought. This place was so ancient. Some of these old oaks might’ve stood when the tracks through the woodlands were main roads, connecting small communities. Countless feet had trodden this path I followed, stretching back through time. I stood still for a moment, closed my eyes. How could anyone doubt that the natural world possessed a

kind of sentience, a personality? Its power was all around me. Its unseen eyes were watching.

I wandered on, progressively falling into a light trance. I was no longer scared, and the tension I'd experienced gradually ebbed away.

I really can't say how much time had passed before I realized I'd entered a part of the woods I didn't know. When I glanced behind me there was barely a path to see. I must go back. And yet . . . the path ahead was clearer, almost as if it were opening up before me, granting me access to a secret. Just a few more steps. It couldn't hurt. I knew the way back. I'd headed west. I could use the position of the sun to direct me.

The path spilled into a small clearing, although it wasn't exactly clear, being a riot of small shrubs and brambles. It took me some moments to notice there was some kind of building on the far side. Then I jumped, uttered a shocked yelp.

A tall figure stood within the tangle of foliage. It was motionless, simply a dark silhouette. I was frozen in place, as if by remaining still I wouldn't be noticed. The figure didn't move and neither did I. Then, the shock bled slowly from me and I lost my fear. I realized what I'd taken for a figure was in fact a twisted, dead tree. I laughed aloud at my skittish imaginings and went toward this uncanny simulacrum. What a fantastic thing it was, like a sculpture in wood and lichen. From a distance, it had looked like a tall being, robed in dark fabric and moss. Its "garments" were frilled with delicate tiers of soft pink fungus. A mass of dead twigs resembled a burst of wild hair. The "arms" were held out, sleeved in thick viridian moss. The "face" was a series of knots and holes in the trunk that resembled an open mouth, staring eyes.

"So *you* are the woman of the woods," I said to the tree, and reached out to touch her. While I was no longer frightened, still I perceived the tree as an entity rather than a lifeless thing. It was a guardian, standing in this forgotten glade. I patted her side a few times, then left my hand resting against her. Closing my eyes, I

imagined her breathing, those damp mossy flanks gently rising and falling beneath my fingers. I wanted a message, of course, some kind of proof. Nothing came.

Patting the tree one final time, I left her, and went to investigate the building. This was little more than a shack that had fallen to ruin, the impression of its former self retained by the ivy that had once surrounded it and now supported its remains. The ghost of a shack. Was it here the midwife of the woods had lived? Perhaps at one time this spot hadn't been so isolated. I imagined women following the narrow track to the wise woman's cottage, the whispered requests that would have been made. Of course, the *withwyf* would have known far more than how to deliver children. I wanted this place to be hers, as I wanted the old, dead tree to be her site guardian.

I managed to squeeze inside the single-room dwelling, but there was nothing further to see. The roof had gone, only crumbling walls remained. Any furniture had been removed or rotted. Here, perhaps, divinings had been made, minor operations performed, strange philters administered. The idea of an older woman teaching a younger one came to my mind. "There was only ever one of you for each generation," I said aloud, sure that I was right. I didn't feel like an intruder or that my presence offended. If anything, the place still existed to reveal the truth to those who found the path, who understood it. A thrill passed through me as I considered that although the women of the woods had gone, their function still remained, trapped in the blood and bones of the landscape itself.

These ideas filled me with a sense of hope. I stood in the center of the ruin, closed my eyes and held out my hands. "Help little Bram," I murmured. "Cast out his sickness."

I listened to the song of the woods, the faint creak and crack of foliage and trees, the sigh of the breeze, the call of a thrush, the distant huff of deer. Immortal sounds, the same now as they'd ever been. These woods—the same as they'd *always* been.

Exhaling slowly, as I'd been holding my breath, I lowered my arms. For a few moments, I kept my eyes shut, imagining the *withwyf* before me. I visualized her as I'd seen her in my dream, a tall woman dressed in dark tattered clothes, but now with a hint of moss and twigs about her. I *must* believe she'd heard my request and would act upon it. But I should leave an offering, a payment.

I had on a scarf I was particularly fond of, since a close friend had bought it for me as a birthday gift the year before—a luxurious swath of beautiful soft wool dyed deep peacock blue. With reverence, I unwound it from my neck and placed it on the floor of the ruin. It was a sacrifice, one I didn't want to make, so therefore more potent. "You have my thanks, lady. I know you will act quickly."

And I'm sure I felt, very briefly, the touch of long hard fingers on my folded hands.

I FOUND MY way back without any difficulty, my heart full of joy and a bittersweet pain. I felt like weeping, yet my eyes remained dry. What was clear to me, however, was that I'd undergone a deep, spiritual experience. The woods had revealed themselves to me. Their spirit had touched me. I'd never experienced anything like it before.

I was so buoyed up by what had happened, I wanted to tell Nettie about it and what I'd seen the day before. Once I got home, Ban told me she was in her studio, working on a painting for a forthcoming storybook. I made coffee and carried two mugs into the room. She smiled and put down her brush. "You look positively radiant," she said. "Did you come across something tall, dark, and handsome in the forest?"

I laughed. "No . . . well, not exactly, but something very strange happened to me."

“Dear gods!” Nettie exclaimed in delight. She sat down at the wide old table in the bay of the window and I sat opposite her. “Come on, tell all!” she said.

So I did. I felt too embarrassed—as it seemed now to be taking something of a liberty—to reveal the request and offering I’d made, but told her everything else, including my dream.

When I finished my tale, she stared at me strangely, without expression, for a few moments.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well, I never expected you to tell me something like this.”

I found this faintly insulting. “Why? Because I’m a spiritually dead townie?”

Nettie shook her head. “No, of course not. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound like that. It’s just that . . . I’ve known you all my life and I know you’ve regarded my beliefs with tolerant fondness . . .” She smiled.

I laughed a little. I couldn’t deny it. “Not just that. I love your stories.”

“I know. But . . . you’ve never had any experiences yourself. Are there things about you I don’t know?”

“No . . . that’s what’s so odd. I’ve always been interested in the paranormal, but as entertainment, I suppose. I’ve never been one for feelings like this. But it felt so real . . . and the dream . . .”

Nettie nodded. “Okay, it looks like my dear insensitive cousin has somehow tapped into the weird. You saw the midwife, or what sounds like her, but before you knew anything of the legend. That’s amazing in itself. Yes, she did exist, and she’s called the *withwyf*, as you saw on the map this morning, but I like to use the term *medjwyf* for her. It means the same. She was also known sometimes as the *medjwyf dauthaz*. You know what that means?”

“No.”

“Take a guess.”

“Really, I have no idea.”

“Okay. A midwife is traditionally a woman who attends an

event, the ‘woman who is with you.’ Most commonly, this refers to births, but the traditional midwife was often also the person who laid out the dead. *Dauthaz* is death. So *medjwyf dauthaz* is ‘the midwife of death.’”

“Makes sense,” I said. “One healer for a whole community, dealing with birth, disease, and death.”

“In some stories,” Nettie continued, “the *medjwyf* was even responsible for overseeing the bridal chamber, to provide evidence a bride had lost her virginity.”

“The bloodied sheet,” I said.

“Yes.”

“And there really was such a woman around here? Did I find her old dwelling?”

“The cottage does exist,” Nettie said, “and we like to believe it was Black Ella’s.”

“That was her name? Sounds grim.”

“I believe it was more of a title than a name, since there would have been many of these women over the centuries. No one knows when the last one was working in *this* area, but stories from other parts of the country suggest they worked quite openly up until the 1950s, perhaps even later.”

“There are still wise women,” I said, “or people who want to be them. Or people who are naturally that way . . . like you.”

Nettie grinned. “Oh, I wouldn’t call myself that. I don’t provide a service to the community, just do my own thing.”

“Look after your own.”

She sipped her coffee. “As much as I’m able.”

“And there was only one *medjwyf* per generation?” I asked.

Nettie frowned a little. “I don’t know about that, but maybe so, for each community. It was a job for life, I’m sure.”

I leaned back in my chair. “You know, I want to believe I saw something supernatural, but another part of me can’t accept that. I can’t deny what I saw, or the feelings I had, which were very real.” I grimaced. “It’s like I believe and disbelieve at the same

time. It feels bizarre."

"Just normal," Nettie said. "When you receive what appears to be evidence of the paranormal, it's always a shock to the system, whatever you believe."

I paused and then said, "Have you ever called on her, to . . . you know . . . *help*?"

"Not yet," Nettie said. She beamed a smiled at me. "Take a look at this picture I'm working on. Tell me what you think." She stood up, went back to her easel.

In that moment, I knew I could never tell her what I'd done.

NETTIE AND I had had plans to explore local stately homes and other sites of interest, visit the nearest town on a shopping spree, go out for meals, but on Monday Bram was too poorly to go to school, so Nettie had to stay home and look after him. We didn't know when he'd be well enough to return to classes. Ban said he'd take me out, and we went for lunch together and later explored an old manor house nearby, but it wasn't the same without Nettie. I think Ban felt it too. It wasn't as if we didn't get on, he and I, but Nettie's absence left a sort of conversational hole. We ran out of things to say to one another. I think Bram was on his mind too, and clearly he wasn't going to talk to me about his son.

THAT NIGHT STRONG winds blew in from the northeast. This wasn't a storm as such, just an incredibly ferocious wind. It howled around Willa's Tump, shouted down the chimney, made the doors rattle. I couldn't dispel the horrible notion that it sought to gain entrance to the house. Occasionally, sitting before the fire in the living room, I'd hear thunderous crashing sounds outside, as if heavy objects were being thrown to the ground. Trees? Sheds? No one

suggested going to look.

Bram was really poorly, and Nettie had spent most of the day by his bed, reading to him. Now she was in the kitchen with Ban, preparing dinner. The living room where I was sitting was just across the hallway. I heard Ban say to Nettie, “Hon, maybe we should call someone.”

“No!” she snapped.

I heard him sigh.

“You know what we agreed,” she said. “We can’t go back on it.”

His voice lowered, but I could still just about hear it over the wind. I thought I heard him say, “Elphie . . . maybe she should go home tomorrow, come back another time.”

And my cousin answered, “That’s not necessary. She is with us.”

At least, that was what it sounded like she said.

AFTER DINNER, WE watched a couple of movies on TV, and drank rather a lot. Still, the atmosphere was strained, too many things unspoken. Ban’s face looked gray, although he clearly made great effort to be good company. I wanted to tell him he didn’t have to bother—I knew why he was so anxious. But I just couldn’t say it.

When I went to bed, even though the central heating was still on, I couldn’t get warm. The wind was so vicious, its voice a baleful shriek. I drifted in and out of sleep, wishing the wind would howl away from this place, and that the morning would come.

At 2:00 a.m. a crash echoed through the house, which made me sit up in bed. It sounded as if both back and front door had been blown open. For a moment, I held my breath, straining to hear. Surely Ban or Nettie would get up and see to the doors.

But no one stirred—that I could hear.

The wind had gotten in. It was seething around the lower

story, moaning. This was no natural element. The smell of outside, the cold dark forest, the wet leaves, the turned earth, crept under my door, surrounded me. I didn't even dare turn on the light.

Then there were footsteps on the stairs, slow and heavy, heading up, not down.

I lay back down in the bed, closed my eyes, squeezed them shut. All I could hear was the gust of my own breath.

I MIGHT'VE LAIN there like that only for minutes, or it could have been an hour. Perhaps I never did wake up and the whole thing was a dream, sounds from outside permeating my sleeping mind. I still don't know, or rather can't decide.

I was woken around 8:00 a.m. by sounds of activity in the house that were not the usual sounds heard in Willa's Tump. Voices I didn't know.

I got out of bed and put on my dressing gown. Out of the window, I saw that there was an ambulance outside with its light flashing. At once I hurried downstairs.

Paramedics were carrying a stretcher to the vehicle. Nettie and Ban were on the drive, holding on to one another.

"Why didn't you wake me?" I asked. "What's happened?"

Nettie just raised a hand, briefly, shook her head.

Of course, it was obvious what had happened. Bram had taken a turn for the worse. As they loaded him into the ambulance, I saw he had a transparent mask over his face. His eyes were closed, his skin more sallow than usual. He'd shrunk dramatically; it was hideous.

Ban and Nettie climbed into the vehicle after him.

"I'll come to the hospital," I said, standing at the open doors.

Nettie seemed senseless, but Ban nodded, said, "Use the car, you know where the keys are." The pair of them looked sucked dry.

"I'll get dressed . . ."

The doors were closed and the ambulance roared off quickly, its siren on.

Once it had gone, everywhere was too quiet. I went back into the house. There was no sign the doors had been blown open, no litter of the forest upon the floors. The house was serene, humming to itself in the way contented houses do.

Upstairs, I dressed myself, but not with any sense of urgency. I realized I didn't want to go to the hospital, even to support the people I loved, because it would be horrible. I'd always feared and hated hospitals. Yet I knew I had to go.

As I brushed my hair, I thought: *If only I'd gotten out of bed last night, looked beyond my door* . . . . But for what? Had *she* come as I'd asked? I'd sought her help, her healing. Was this episode the last stand of Bram's sickness before it went away? I didn't want to think about any other aspect of the *medjwyf*.

The phone rang. I went downstairs to answer it. Ban's voice sounded like someone else entirely.

"He's gone," he said, and in his words was the bewildered voice of a child who wanted me to tell him what he said wasn't true. "Bram's dead, Elphie."

"Oh god, I'm so sorry . . ." There is nothing you can say at such a time that doesn't sound trite or clichéd. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"No," Ban said, "there's no need. Sort the house out. Be there for Nettie when we get back. We'll be an hour or so."

It seemed strange they'd return so quickly, but then what else can you do when the spirit has fled the body?

Numb, I went upstairs into Bram's room. The bed was bloody, which was a shock. He must've coughed up blood, I thought. It took all my courage to drag the sheet and quilt from it, so Nettie wouldn't have to. The bedding felt contaminated somehow. I stuffed it all into a bin bag, which I put outside, then cleaned the waterproof covering over the mattress. I arranged Bram's soft toys on the windowsill, checked the floor for marks. It was clean.

I TIDIED THE entire house, vacuumed the floors. I focused on the tasks, didn't want to think.

When Ban and Nettie came home, it was nearly two hours later. I rushed to Nettie, embraced her, feeling it was better to say nothing rather than utter a hackneyed condolence.

"It's okay," she said to me, pushing me away a little but holding onto my shoulders. Tears ran down her face, but she was smiling. "We had our time and we're grateful for that. We knew it was a gift that wouldn't last forever."

"They couldn't do anything . . . ?"

She shook her head. "No. He was already gone by the time they arrived here. But the body was breathing so they felt they had to try."

"It was so weird . . . last night . . . I thought the doors blew open and someone came in."

"It takes three days," Nettie said.

"What?"

"Three days for her to come."

I stared at her, horrified.

"Don't worry, Elphie," Nettie said, "it wasn't you. She was on her way before that."

"I don't know what you mean," I said, lying.

"Bram was born in this house," Nettie said. "Anywhere else, he might not have lived a year."

With that she walked away from me, heading for the stairs.

THE DARK COUNTRY

DENNIS ETCHISON

Dennis Etchison (1943–2019) was described as "the most original living horror writer in America" and "the finest writer of psychological horror this genre has produced."

He was a three-time winner of both the British Fantasy and World Fantasy Awards. His stories appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies since 1961 and were collected in *The Dark Country*, *Red Dreams*, *The Blood Kiss*, *The Death Artist*, *Talking in the Dark*, *Fine Cuts*, *Got To Kill Them All & Other Stories*, and a massive career retrospective, *It Only Comes Out At Night & Other Stories*, from Centipede Press.

Etchison was also the author of the novels *Darkside*, *Shadowman*, *California Gothic*, *Double Edge*, *The Fog*, *Halloween II* and *III*, and *Videodrome*, and the editor of *Cutting Edge*, *Masters of Darkness I–III*, *MetaHorror*, *The Museum of Horrors*, and (with Ramsey Campbell and Jack Dann) *Gathering the Bones*.

He wrote extensively for film, television, and radio, including more than 150 scripts for *The Twilight Zone Radio Dramas*, and he served as president of the Horror Writers Association from 1992 to 1994.

"This story was written after visiting a Mexican tourist

town about sixty miles below the California border," recalled the author. "I had just finished the final draft of a novel called *Darkside*. The manuscript was dropped into the mail as I left Los Angeles, and I was eager to get away for some rest and relaxation in the sun. Several friends went with me, and so did a shirt-pocket tape recorder I had used to take notes for the novel. But, as H. P. Lovecraft once observed, it is a mistake to fancy that horror is associated inextricably with darkness. I found it in the glare of the midafternoon.

"This was my first time in Ensenada, and I could not help but record some of the vivid images I saw there. A few months later I transcribed what was on the tape and realized that I might have the raw ingredients for a story. But what kind? I remembered attending a lecture by Christopher Isherwood many years earlier, during which he described a forthcoming novel, *Down There on a Visit*. He had written about several people who traveled into Mexico from California, only to discover that their trip below the border represented a kind of descent into the subconscious. Unable to make it work to his satisfaction, he finally scrapped the completed manuscript and wrote an entirely different book, later published under that same title. I also remembered one of my favorite stories from Ray Bradbury's *The October Country*, 'The Next in Line,' and the many colorful and terrifying memories he had about his first trip to Mexico.

"Leaving Los Angeles after months of intense work, I had arrived at Quintas Papagayo exhausted but still nervous about the final draft of *Darkside*, not to mention some worrisome personal issues—the perfect ingredients for a heightened state of anxiety, even paranoia. I had no choice but to write it as a horror story. I arranged the lines of my transcript to read as blank verse, in an

attempt to give them an unusual and unsettling rhythm, then retyped them as prose.

"This became the first two or three pages of 'The Dark Country.'

"Twenty years later I began working as an editor for Mandalay Publications in Los Angeles, at a bilingual magazine called *Estylo*. One day I told the staff about my trip to Ensenada and the story I had written. They thought I was joking. Ensenada is not dark. It is not even the real Mexico, they explained, only the Baja Peninsula —a safe, benign destination for gringos. For them, the real Dark Country is the US, which they had found so strange and frightening when they arrived here. And of course they were right. It all depends on your point of view.

"To paraphrase Bradbury, it is not necessary to stand on one's head to see the world in a different way. A tilt a few degrees to the left or right is all it takes . . ."

MARTIN SAT BY the pool, the wind drying his hair.

A fleshy, airborne spider appeared on the edge of the book that he had been reading there. From this angle it cast a long, pointed needle across the yellowing page. The sun was hot and clean; it went straight for his nose. Overweight American children practiced their volleyball on the bird-of-paradise plants. Weathered rattan furniture gathered dust beyond the peeling diving board.

Traffic passed on the road. Trucks, campers, bikes.

The pool that would not be scraped till summer. The wooden chairs that had been ordered up from the States. Banana leaves. Olive trees. A tennis court that might be done next year. A single color TV antenna above the palms. By the slanted cement patio, heliotrope daisies, speckled climbing vines. The morning a net of

light on the water. Boats fishing in Todos Santos Bay.

A smell like shrimp Veracruz blowing off the silvered waves.

And a strangely familiar island, like a hazy floating giant, where the humpback whales play. Yesterday in Ensenada, the car horns talking and a crab taco in his hand, he had wanted to buy a pair of huaraches and a Mexican shirt. The best tequila in the world for three-and-a-half a liter. Noche Buena beer, foil labels that always peel before you can read them. Delicados con Filtro cigarettes.

Bottles of agua mineral. Tehuacan con gas. *No returnable*.

He smiled as he thought of churros at the Blow Hole, the maid who even washed his dishes, the Tivoli Night Club with Reno cocktail napkins, mescal flavored with worm, eggs fresh from the nest, chorizo grease in the pan, bar girls with rhinestone-studded Aztec headbands, psychoactive liqueurs, seagulls like the tops of valentines, grilled corvina with lemon, the endless plumes of surf . . .

It was time for a beer run to the bottling factory in town.

"*¡Buenos días!*"

Martin looked up, startled. He was blinded by the light. He fumbled his dark glasses down and moved his head. A man and a woman stood over his chair. The sun was at their backs.

"*¿American?*"

"Yes," said Martin. He shielded his forehead and tried to see their faces. Their features were blacked in by the glare that spilled around their heads.

"I told you he was an American," said the woman. "Are you studying?" "What?"

Martin closed the book self-consciously. It was a paperback edition of *The Penal Colony*, the only book he had been able to borrow from any of the neighboring cabins. Possibly it was the only book in Quintas Papagayo. For some reason the thought depressed him profoundly, but he had brought it poolside anyway. It seemed the right thing to do. He could not escape the feeling

that he ought to be doing something more than nursing a tan. And the magazines from town were all in Spanish.

He slipped his sketchbook on top of Kafka and opened it awkwardly.

"I'm supposed to be working," he said. "On my drawings. You know how it is." They didn't, probably, but he went on. "It's difficult to get anything done down here."

"He's an artist!" said the woman.

"My wife thought you were an American student on vacation," said the man.

"Our son is a student, you see," said the woman. Martin didn't, but nodded sympathetically. She stepped aside to sit on the arm of another deck chair under the corrugated green fiberglass siding. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse and thigh-length shorts. "He was studying for his master's degree in political science at UCLA, but now he's decided not to finish. I tried to tell him he should at least get his teaching credentials, but—"

"Our name's Winslow," said the man, extending a muscular hand. "Mr. and Mrs. Winslow."

"Jack Martin."

"It was the books," said Mr. Winslow. "Our boy always has books with him, even on visits." He chuckled and shook his head.

Martin nodded.

"You should see his apartment," said Mrs. Winslow. "So many." She gestured with her hands as if describing the symptoms of a hopeless affliction.

There was an embarrassing lull. Martin looked to his feet. He flexed his toes. The right ones were stiff. For something further to do, he uncapped a Pilot Fineliner pen and touched it idly to the paper. Without realizing it, he smiled. *This trip must be doing me more good than I'd hoped*, he thought. *I haven't been near a college classroom in fifteen years*.

A wave rushed toward the rocks at the other side of the cabins.

"Staying long?" asked the man, glancing around nervously. He

was wearing Bermuda shorts over legs so white they were almost phosphorescent.

"I'm not sure," said Martin.

"May I take a peek at your artwork?" asked the woman.

He shrugged and smiled.

She lifted the sketchbook from his lap with infinite delicacy, as the man began talking again.

He explained that they owned their own motor home, which was now parked on the Point, at the end of the rock beach, above the breakwater. Weekend auto insurance cost them $13.70 in Tijuana. They came down whenever they got the chance. They were both retired, but there were other things to consider—just what, he did not say. But it was not the same as it used to be. He frowned at the moss growing in the bottom of the pool, at the baby weeds poking up through the sand in the canister ashtrays, at the separating layers of the sawed-off diving board.

Martin could see more questions about to surface behind the man's tired eyes. He cleared his throat and squirmed in his chair, feeling the sweat from his arms soaking into the unsealed wood. Mr. Winslow was right, of course. Things were not now as they once were. But he did not relish being reminded of it, not now, not here.

A small figure in white darted into his field of vision, near the edge of the first cabin. It was walking quickly, perhaps this direction.

"There's my maid," he said, leaning forward. "She must be finished now." He unstuck his legs from the chaise lounge.

"She has the keys?" said the man.

"I suppose so. Yes, I'm sure she does. Well—"

"Does she always remember to lock up?"

He studied the man's face, but a lifetime of apprehensions were recorded there, too many for Martin to isolate one and read it accurately.

"I'll remind her," he said, rising.

He picked up his shirt, took a step toward Mrs. Winslow and stood shifting his weight.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the maid put a hand to the side of her face.

Mrs. Winslow closed the pad, smoothed the cover and handed it back. “Thank you,” she said oddly.

Martin took it and offered his hand. He realized at once that his skin had become uncomfortably moist, but Mr. Winslow gripped it firmly and held it. He confronted Martin soberly, as if about to impart a bit of fatherly advice.

“They say he comes down out of the hills,” said Winslow, his eyes unblinking. Martin half turned to the low, tan range that lay beyond the other side of the highway. When he turned back, the man’s eyes were waiting. “He’s been doing it for years. It’s something of a legend around here. They can’t seem to catch him. We never took it seriously, until now.”

“Is that right?”

“Why, last night, while we were asleep, he stole an envelope of traveler’s checks and a whole carton of cigarettes from behind our heads. Can you beat that? Right inside the camper! Of course we never bothered to lock up. Why should we? Everyone’s very decent around here. We’ve never had any trouble ourselves. Until this trip. It’s hard to believe.”

“Yes, it is.” Martin attempted to pull back as a tingling began in his stomach. But the man continued to pump his hand, almost desperately, Martin thought.

“The best advice I can give you, young man, is to lock your doors at night. From now on. You never know.”

“Thanks, I will.”

“He comes out after the sun goes down.” He would not let go of Martin’s hand. “I figure he must hit the beach three, four in the morning, when all the lights are out. Slips right in. No one notices. And then it’s too late.”

Martin pretended to struggle with the books so that he could

drop his hand. “Well, I hope you’re able to enjoy the rest of your vacation.” He eyed the maid. “Now I’d better—”

“We’re warning everybody along the beach,” said Winslow.

“Maybe you should report it.”

“That don’t do no good. They listen to your story, but there’s nothing they can do.”

“Good luck to you, then,” said Martin.

“Thank you again,” said the woman peculiarly. “And don’t forget. You lock your door tonight!”

“I will,” said Martin, hurrying away. I won’t, that is. Will, won’t, what did it matter? He sidestepped the dazzling flowers of an ice plant and ascended the cracked steps of the pool enclosure. He crossed the paved drive and slowed.

The maid had passed the last of the beachfront houses and was about to intersect his path. He waited for her to greet him as she always did. *I should at least pretend to talk to her*, he thought, in case the Winslows are still watching. He felt their eyes, or someone’s, close at his back.

“*Buenos días*,” he said cheerfully.

She did not return the greeting. She did not look up. She wagged her head and trotted past, clutching her uniform at the neck.

He paused and stared after her. He wondered in passing about her downcast eyes, and about the silent doorways of the other cabins, though it was already past ten o’clock. And then he notice the scent of ozone that now laced the air, though no thunderhead was visible yet on the horizon, only a gathering fog far down the coastline, wisps of it beginning to striate the wide, pale sky above the sagging telephone poles. And he wondered about the unsteadiness in Mrs. Winslow’s voice as she had handed back the sketchbook. It was not until he was back at the beach that he remembered: the pages he had shown her were blank. There were no sketches at all yet in the pad, only the tiny flowing blot he had made with his pen on the first sheet while they talked, like a

miniature misshapen head or something else, something else, stark and unreadable on the crisp white sulfite paper.

HE WAS RELIEVED to see that the private beach had finally come alive with its usual quota of sunbathers. Many of them had probably arisen early, shortly after he'd left for the quiet of the pool, and immediately swarmed to the surf with no thought of TV or the morning paper, habits they had left checked at the border sixty miles from here. A scattered few lagged back, propped out on their patios, sipping coffee and keeping an eye on the children who were bounding through the spume. The cries of the children and of the gulls cut sharply through the waves, which, disappointingly, were beginning to sound to Martin like nothing so much as an enormous screenful of ball bearings.

There was the retired rent-a-cop on holiday with his girlfriend, stretched out on a towel and intent on his leg exercises. There was the middle-aged divorcee from two doors down, bent over the tide pools, hunting for moonstones among jealous clusters of aquamarine anemones. And there was Will, making time with the blonde in the blue tank top. He seemed to be explaining to her some sort of diagram in the slicked sand between polished stones. Martin toed into his worn rubber sandals and went down to join them.

"Want to go to a party?" Will said to him as he came up.

"When?"

"Whenever," said the blonde in the blue top. She tried to locate Martin's face, gave up and gazed back in the general direction of the southern bungalows.

There a party was still in progress, as it had been since last Wednesday, when Will and Martin had arrived. The other party, the one on the north side, had apparently been suspended for a few hours, though just now Martin watched a penny rocket streak into the sky from the bathroom window, leaving an almost

invisible trail of powder-blue smoke in the air above the water. The skyrocket exploded with a faint report like a distant rifle and began spiraling back to earth. Martin heard hoarse laughter and the sudden cranking up of stereo speakers inside the sliding doors. So the party there was also nearly in full swing again, or had never let up. Perhaps it was all one big party, with his cabin sandwiched like a Christian Science reading room between two pirate radio stations. He remembered the occasional half-dressed teenager staggering around the firepit and across his porch last night, grunting about more beer and did he know where those nurses were staying? Martin had sat outside till he fell asleep, seeing them piss their kidneys out on the steaming stones by the footpath.

"Bummer," said the girl seriously. Martin noticed that she was lugging around an empty twelve-ounce bottle. She upended it and a few slippery drops hit the rocks. "You guys wouldn't know where the Dos Equis's stashed, wouldjou?"

"*No es problema*, my dear," said Will, steering her toward the patio.

Martin followed. Halfway there the girl wobbled around and hurled the bottle as high as she could away from the shoreline. Unfortunately, her aim was not very good. Martin had to duck. He heard it whistle end-over-end over his head and shatter on the flat rocks. Will caught her under the arms and staggered her inside. Next door, a Paul Simon song was playing on the tape deck.

By the time Martin got there she was on her way out, cradling a bottle of Bohemia. Again she tried to find his eyes, gave up and began picking her way across the rocks.

"Take it slow," yelled Will. "Hey, sure you don't want to lie down a while?"

Martin grinned at him and walked past into the high-beamed living room. The fireplace was not lighted, nor was the wall heater, but a faint but unmistakable odor of gas lingered in the corners.

“We better stock up on Dos Equis from now on,” said Will.

“Is that her favorite?”

“She doesn’t care. But we shelled out a deposit on the case of Bohemia. Dos Equis is no-return.”

Martin stood staring out at the island in the bay. The fishing boats were moving closer to shore. Now he could barely make out the details of the nearest one. He squinted. It wasn’t a fishing boat at all, he realized. It was much larger than he had imagined, some kind of oil tanker, perhaps. “Guess what, Will? We’re going to have to start locking the doors.”

“Why? Afraid the *putas* are gonna OD on Spanish fly and jump our bones in the middle of the night?”

“You wish,” said Martin. He sniffed around the heater, then followed the scent to the kitchen and the stove. “The gas pilots,” he said. “It’s the draft. You—we’re—always going in and out. The big door’s open all the time.”

“Got a match, man?” Will took out a bent cigarette, straightened it, and crumpled the pack. The table was littered with empty packs of cheap Mexican cigarettes, Negritos and Faros mostly. Martin wondered how his friend could smoke such garbage. He took out his Zippo. Will struck it with an exaggerated shaking of his hands, but it was out of fluid. He stooped over the gas stove and winked at Martin. He turned the knob. The burner lit. He inhaled, coughed, and reached for the tequila. He poured himself a tall one mixed with grapefruit juice. “Mmm. Good for the throat, but it still burns a little.”

“Your system runs on alcohol, Willy. You know that, don’t you?”

“Don’t all machines?”

“Myself, I could go for some eggs right now. How about you? What’ve we got left?” Martin went to the sink. It was full of floating dishes. “Hey, what the hell is it with the maid? We did remember to leave her a tip yesterday. Didn’t we?”

“One of us must have.”

That was it, then. That was why she had skipped them, and then snubbed him this morning. That had to be it. Didn't it?

The tape deck next door was now blaring a golden oldie by Steely Dan. Martin slid the glass door closed. Then he snagged his trousers from the back of a chair and put them on over his trunks. Started to put them on. They did not feel right. He patted his back pocket.

Will slid the door back open halfway. "You're serious, aren't you? Look at it this way. Leave it like this and the gas'll just blow on outside. Relax, man. That's what you came down here for, isn't it? After what happened, you need . . ."

Martin checked the chair. On the table were a deck of playing cards from a Mission Bay savings and loan, the backs of which were imprinted with instructions about conserving energy; a Mexican wrestling magazine with a cover picture of the masked hero, El Santo, in the ring against a hooded character in red jumpsuit and horns; and an old mineral water bottle full of cigarette butts. On the floor, lying deflated between the table legs, was his wallet.

"There's another reason, I'm afraid." Martin twisted open the empty wallet and showed it to his friend.

"Who in the hell . . . ?"

"Well, it certainly wasn't the maid. Look at this place." Outside, a small local boy came trudging through the patios. He was carrying a leather case half as big as he was. He hesitated at the cabin on the south side, as three teenaged American boys, their hair layered identically and parted in the middle, called their girls out into the sun. "It must have happened during the night."

"Christ!" said Will. He slapped the tabletop. He reached for his own wallet. It was intact. "There. I was over there partying all night, remember? They must've passed by every place where anybody was still up."

The small boy opened his case and the American girls began poring excitedly over a display of Indian jewelry, rings, belt

buckles, and necklaces of bright-tooled silver and turquoise. From a distance, an old man watched the boy and waited, nodding encouragement.

"You should have gone with me," said Will. "I told you. Well, don't you worry, Jack. I've got plenty here for both of us."

"No, man. I can wire my agent or—"

"Look," said Will, "I can even kite a check if I have to, to cover the rental till we get back. They'll go for it. I've been coming here since I was a kid."

I've got to get away from here, thought Martin. *No, that isn't right. Where else is there to go? I've come this far already just to get away. It's hopeless. It always was.* You can run, he told himself, but you can't hide. *Why didn't I realize that?*

"Here," said Will. "Here's twenty for now."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry about it. I'd better go see if the nurses got hit, too. Saw a bunch of people in a huddle down the beach a while ago." He drained his glass. "Then I'll make another beer run. The hell with it. We're gonna party tonight, goddamn it! You going by the office, Jack?"

"Sure."

"Then you might as well report it to the old lady. I think she's got a son or a nephew in the federales. Maybe they can do something about it."

"Maybe," said Martin, cracking open a beer. He could have told Will that it wouldn't do any good. He stopped in at the office anyway. It didn't.

He wandered on up the highway to Enrique's Café. On the way he passed a squashed black cat, the empty skin of it among the plants, the blood-red flowers and spotted adder's tongues and succulents by the roadside. The huevos rancheros were runny but good. When he got back, Will's four-wheel drive was still parked under the carport. He took the keys and made the beer run into town himself, police cars honking him out of the way to make left

turns from right-hand lanes, zigzagging across the busy intersections of the city to avoid potholes. He bought a case of Dos Equis and, for forty cents more, a liter of soft, hot tortillas. As the afternoon wore on he found himself munching them, rolled with butter and later plain, even though he wasn't really hungry.

That evening he sat alone on a bench by the rocks, hearing but not listening to a Beatles song ("Treat Me Like You Did the Night Before"), the smoke from his Delicado wafting on the breeze, blending with woodsmoke from the chimneys and rising slowly to leave a smear like the Milky Way across the Pleiades. *It's time for me to leave this place*, he thought. *Not to run away, no, not this time; but to go back. And face the rest of it, my life, no matter how terrible things may have turned back home since I left.*

Not Will, though; he should stay awhile longer if he likes. True, it was my idea; he only took the time off at my suggestion, setting it all up to make me comfortable; he knew I couldn't take any more last week, the way things were up there. He's my friend. Still, he was probably waiting for just such an excuse in order to get away himself.

So I'll call or wire the agency for a plane ticket, give them a cock-and-bull story about losing everything—the truth, in other words. It was the truth, wasn't it? I'll say the trip was part of the assignment. I had to come down here to work on some new sketches for the book, to follow a lead about headstone rubbings in, let's see, Guanajuato. Only I never made it that far. I stopped off for some local color. Charge it against my royalty statement . . . I'll talk to them tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow.

Meanwhile, there's still tonight . . .

But I should tell Will first.

He resumed walking. There was a fire on the breakwater by the Point. He went toward it. Will would be in one of the cabins, partying with a vengeance. Martin glanced in one window. A slideshow was in progress, with shots that looked like the pockmarked surface of another planet taken from space. He pressed closer and saw that these pictures were really close-ups of

the faces of newborn seals or sea lions. Not that one, he thought, and moved on.

One of the parties he came to was in the big cabin two doors north of his own. That one was being rented, he remembered, by the producer of a show in the late 1970s called *Starship Disco*. Martin had never seen it.

An Elvis Costello tape shook the walls. A young card hustler held forth around the living-room table. A warm beer was pushed into Martin's hand by a girl. He popped the beer open and raised it, feeling his body stir as he considered her. *Why not? But she could be my daughter, technically*, he thought, *couldn't she?* Then: *what a disgusting point of view*. Then: *what am I doing to myself?* Then it was too late; she was gone.

Will was not in the back rooms. The shelf in the hallway held three toppling books. *Well, well*, he thought, *there are readers down here, after all.* Then he examined them—*By Love Possessed* by Cozzens, *Invitation to Tea* by Monica Lang (The People's Book Club, Chicago, 1952), *The Foundling* by Francis Cardinal Spellman. They were covered with years of dust.

He ducked into the bathroom and shut the door, seeing the mirror and razor blade lying next to the sink, the roll of randomly perforated crepe-paper toilet tissue. There was a knock on the door. He excused himself and went out, and found Will in the kitchen.

"*¡Dos cervezas, Juan!*" Will was shouting. "Whoa. I feel more like I do now than when I got here!" With some prodding, he grabbed two cold ones and followed Martin outside, rubbing his eyes.

He seemed relieved to sit down.

"So," began Martin. "What did you find out? Did anyone else get popped last night?"

"Plenty! One, the nurses. Two, the bitch from San Diego. Three, the—where is it now? Ojai. Those people. The . . ." He ran out of fingers. "Let's see. Anyway, there's plenty, let me tell you."

The ships were now even nearer the shore. Martin saw their black hulls closing in over the waves.

"I was thinking," he said. "Maybe it's time to go. What would you say to that, man?"

"Nobody's running scared. That's not the way to play it. You should hear 'em talk. They'll get his ass next time, whoever he is. Believe it. The kids, they didn't get hit. But three of those other guys are rangers. Plus there's the cop. See the one in there with the hat? He says he's gonna lay a trap, cut the lights about three o'clock, everybody gets quiet, then *bam*! You better believe it. They're mad as hell."

"But why—"

"It's the dock strike. It happens every year when there's a layoff. The locals get hungry. They swoop down out of the hills like bats."

Just then a flaming object shot straight through the open front door and fizzled out over the water. There was a hearty "All r-r-right!" from a shadow on the porch, and then the patio was filled with pogoing bodies and clapping hands. The night blossomed with matches and fireworks, thousand-foot skyrockets, bottle rockets, and volleys of Mexican cherry bombs as the party moved outside and chose up sides for a firecracker war. Soon Martin could no longer hear himself think. He waited it out. Will was laughing.

Martin scanned the beach beneath the screaming lights. And noticed something nearby that did not belong. It was probably a weird configuration of kelp, but . . . he got up and investigated.

It was only this: a child's broken doll, wedged half under the stones. What had he supposed it was? It had been washed in on the tide, or deliberately dismembered and its parts strewn at the waterline, he could not tell which. In the flickering explosions, its rusty eye sockets appeared to be streaked with tears.

A minute after it had begun, the firecracker war was over. They sat apart from the cheering and the breaking bottles,

watching the last shot of a Roman candle sizzle below the surface of the water like a green torpedo. There was scattered applause, and then a cry went up from another party house down the beach as a new round of fireworks was launched there. Feet slapped the sand, dodging rocks.

"Do you really believe that?"

"What?"

"About someone coming down from the hills," said Martin. *Like bats*. He shuddered.

"Watch this," said Will. He took his bottle and threw it into the air, snapping it so it flew directly at a palm tree thirty feet away. It smashed into the trunk at the ragged trimline.

Instantly the treetop began to tremble. There was a high rustling and a shaking and a scurrying. And a rattling of tiny claws. A jagged frond dropped spear-like to the beach.

"See that? It's rats. The trees around here are full of 'em. You see how bushy it is on top? It never gets trimmed up there. Those rats are born, live, and die in the trees. They never touch down."

"But how? I mean, what do they eat if—?"

"Dates. Those are palm trees, remember? And each other, probably. You've never seen a dead one on the ground, have you?"

Martin admitted he hadn't.

"Not that way with the bats, though. They have to come out at night. Maybe they even hit the rats. I never saw that. But they have mouths to feed, don't they? There's nothing much to eat up in the hills. It must be the same with the peasants. They have families. Wouldn't you?"

"I hate to say this. But. You did lock up, didn't you?"

Will laughed dryly. "Come on. I've got something for you. I think it's time you met the nurses."

Martin made a quick side trip to check the doors at their place, and they went on. They covered the length of the beach before Will found the porch he was looking for. Martin reached out to steady his friend, and almost fell himself. He was getting high. It

was easy.

As they let themselves in, the beach glimmered at their backs with crushed abalone shells and scuttling hermit crabs. Beyond the oil tankers, the uncertain outline of the island loomed in the bay. It was called Dead Man's Island, Will told him.

HE WOKE WITH the sensation that his head was cracking open. Music or something like it in the other room, throbbing through the thin walls like the pounding surf. Voices. An argument of some kind. He brushed at the cobwebs. He had been lost in a nightmare of domination and forced acquiescence before people who meant to do him harm. It returned to him in fragments. What did it mean? He shook it off and rolled out of bed.

There was the floor he had pressed with his hand last night to stop the room from spinning. There was the nurse, tangled in the sheets next to him. He guessed she was the nurse. He couldn't see her face.

He went into the bathroom. He took a long draft of water from the faucet before he came out. He raised his head and the room spun again. The light from the window hurt his eyes—actual physical pain. He couldn't find his sock. He tottered into the other room.

A young man with blown-dry hair was playing the tape deck too loudly. The sound vibrated the bright air, which seemed thin and brittle, hammering it like beaten silver. There was the girl in the blue tank top, still seated next to the smoldering fireplace. An empty bottle of Damiana Liqueur was balanced against her thigh. Her eyes were closed and her face was stony. He wondered if she had slept that way, propped upright all night. On the table were several Parker Brothers–type games from stateside: Gambler, Creature Features, The Game of Life. A deck of Gaiety Brand nudie cards, with a picture on the box of a puppy pulling a bikini top out of a purse. Someone had been playing solitaire. Martin couldn't

remember.

There was a commotion outside.

"What's that?" he said, shielding his eyes.

"Talking Heads," said the young man. He showed Martin the tape box. "They're pretty good. That lead guitar line is hard to play. It's so repetitious."

"No, I mean . . ."

Martin scratched and went into the kitchen. It was unoccupied, except for a cricket chirping somewhere behind the refrigerator. Breakfast was in process; eggs were being scrambled in a blender the nurses had brought with them from home. Martin protected his eyes again and looked outside.

There was Will. And there were three or four tan beach boys from the other party. And the cop. He wasn't doing his leg exercises this morning. They were having an argument.

Martin stumbled out.

"But you can't do that," one of them was saying.

"Stay cool, okay, motherfuck? You want the whole beach to know?"

"You think they don't already?"

"The hell they do! We drug him over out of the way. No one'll __"

"No one but the maids!"

"That's what I'm *say*ing. You guys are a bunch of jack-offs. Jesus Christ! I'm about *this* close to kicking your ass right now, do you know that?"

"All right, all right!" said Will. "That kind of talk's just digging us in deeper. Now let's run through the facts. One—"

Martin came up. They shot looks at each other that both startled him and made him unreasonably afraid for their safety as well as his own. They stopped talking, their eyes wild, as if they had gobbled a jar of Mexican amphetamines.

Will took him aside.

"We've got to do something!" said the one with a souvenir hat.

“What’re you—”

“Hold on,” said Will. “We’re all in this together, like it or—”

“I’m not the one who—”

“—Like it or not. Now just try to keep a tight asshole another minute, will you, while I talk to my friend Jack? It’s his neck, too.”

They started back up the beach. Will propelled him ahead of the others, as to a rendezvous of great urgency.

“They got him,” said Will.

“Who?”

“The thief, whoever he was. Poor bastard. Two guys from next door cornered him outside our place. Sometime around dawn, the way I get it. Apparently he fell on the rocks. He’s dead. They found me here a little while ago. Now—”

“*What?*”

“—Now there’s no use shitting bricks. It’s done. What we have to do is think of a way to put ourselves in the clear—fast. We’re the strangers here.”

“We can make it look like an accident,” said the one in the hat. “Those rocks are—”

“Accident, hell,” said the security cop. “It was self-defense, breaking and entering. We caught him and blew him away. No court in—”

“This isn’t the USA, you dumb shit. You know what greaser jails are like? They hate our guts. All they want’s our money. This buddy of mine, he got . . .”

And so it went till they reached the porch, the surrounding beach littered with the casings of burnt-out rockets, vomit drying on the rocks, broken clam shells bleaching between the rocks, the rocks like skulls. And here blood, vivid beyond belief even on the bricks of the patio, great splotches and gouts of it, like gold coins burnished in the sun, a trail that led them in the unforgiving light of day to the barbecue pit and the pile of kindling stacked in the charcoal shade.

Martin knelt and tore at the logs.

And there.

The body was hidden inside a burlap sack. It was the body of the boy who had come by yesterday, the boy who had wanted to sell his jewelry.

He felt his stomach convulse. The small face was scraped raw, the long eyelashes caked and flaking, the dark skin driven from two of the ribs to show white muscle and bone. A great fear overtook Martin, like wings settling upon him, blocking out the sun. He folded under them momentarily and dry-heaved in the ashes.

Will was pacing the narrow patio like a prisoner in a cell, legs pumping out and back over the cracking cement, pivoting faster and faster at the edges until he was practically spinning, generating a hopeless rage that would not be denied but could not be released. His hands were shaking violently, and his arms and shoulders and body. He looked around with slitted eyes, chin out, lips drawn in, jaws grinding stone. Far down the beach by the Point an elderly man came walking, hesitating at each house and searching each lot. He was carrying a leather case.

Will said, “You kicked him to death, didn’t you? You stomped this child until he was dead.” Then, his voice a hiss, he began to curse them between his teeth with an unspeakable power and vileness. The one in the hat tried to break in. He started shouting.

“It was dark! He could’ve been anyone! What was he doing creepin’ around here? He could’ve been—”

But Will was upon him, his arms corded, his fingers going for the throat. The others closed in. People on the beach were turning to stare. Martin saw it all as if in slow-motion: himself rising at last to his full height, leaping into it a split second before the others could grab hold, as he fell on their arms to stop the thumbs from Will’s eyes, to break Will’s hands from the other’s throat. Everything stopped. Martin stepped between them as the young one fell back to the flagstone wall. Martin raised his right hand, flattened and angled it like a knife. With his left he cupped the

back of the young man's neck, holding it almost tenderly. The young man's eyes were almost kind. They were eyes Martin had seen all his life, outside recruiting offices and Greyhound bus depots the years over, and they were a law unto themselves. He brought his right hand down sharp and hard across the face, again, again, three times, like pistol shots. The tan went white, then red where he had slapped it. For a moment nobody said anything. The old man kept coming.

THEY PASSED MOTORCYCLE cops, overheated VWs, Jeeps, Chevy Luvs, Ford Couriers with camper shells, off-road vehicles with heavy-duty shocks, and a mile outside of town, a half acre of pastel gravestones by the main road. Martin fit as best he could among the plastic water jugs, sleeping bags, and Instamatic cameras in the back seat. The boys from next door were piled in with him, the one in the hat in front and Will at the controls of the four-wheel drive.

The twenty mile access road behind Ensenada wound them higher and higher, pummeling them continuously until they were certain that the tie-rods or the A-frame or their bodies would shake loose and break apart at the very next turn. The lane shrank to a mere dirt strip, then to a crumbling shale-and-sandstone ledge cut impossibly around the backs of the hills, a tortuous serpentine above abandoned farmland and the unchecked acreage between the mountains and the sea. Twice, at least one of the wheels left the road entirely; they had to pile out and lay wild branches under the tires to get across fissures that had no bottom. Martin felt his kidneys begin to ache under the endless pounding. One of the boys threw up and continued to retch over the side until Will decided they had gone far enough, but no one opened his mouth to complain. After more than an hour, they set the hand brake at the start of a primitive downslope, blocked the wheels with granite chips, and stumbled the rest of the way, numb and reeling.

The silence was overpowering. Nothing moved, except for the random scrabbling of lizards and the falling of individual leaves and blades of grass. As they dragged the sack down to the meadows, Martin concentrated on the ribbon of dirt they had driven, watching for the first sign of another car, however unlikely that was. A small, puddled heat mirage shimmered on the dust, coiled and waiting to be splashed. A squirrel darted across the road, silhouetted as it paused in stop-motion, twitched its pointed head and then ran on, disappearing like an escaped shooting gallery target. Great powdered monarch butterflies aimlessly swam the convection currents; like back home, he thought. *Yes, of course; I should have known. Only too much like home.*

"Dig here," said Will.

The old wound in Martin's foot was hurting him again. He had thought it would be healed by now, but it wasn't. He rocked back wearily on one heel. A withered vine caught at his ankle. It snapped easily with a dull, fleshy sound as he shook free. He took another step, and something moist and solid broke underfoot. He looked down.

He kicked at the grass. It was only a tiny melon, one of dozens scattered nearby and dying on the vine. He rolled it over, revealing its soft underbelly. *Too much rain this season*, he thought absently; *too much or too little, nourishing them excessively or not enough*. What was the answer? He picked it up and lobbed it over their heads. It splattered on the road in a burst of pink. *Watermelons*, he thought, while fully formed seeds pale as unborn larvae slithered off his shoe and into the damp grass. Who planted them here? And who will return for the harvest, only to find them already gone to seed? He stooped and wiped his hand. There was a faint but unmistakable throb and murmur in the ground, as though through a railroad track, announcing an unseen approach from miles away.

"What are you going to do, Jackie?"

Martin stared back at Will. He hadn't expected the question,

not now.

"It's like this," said Will, taking him to one side. "Michael, for one, wants to get back to his own van and head on deeper into Baja, maybe San Quintin, lay low for a few days. He wasn't registered, so there's no connection. Some of the others sound like they're up for the same, or for going north right away, tonight. Kevin's due to check out today, anyway."

"And you?"

"Don't know yet. I haven't decided. I'll probably stay on for appearances, but you do what you want. I wouldn't worry about the maid or anyone coming by to check up. Anyway, we hosed off the patio. Nobody else saw a thing, I'm sure. The girls don't know anything about it."

There was a grunt. The sack, being lowered, had split open at the seams. Hands hurried to reclose it.

"What's that?"

Will grabbed a wrist. A silver bracelet inlaid with polished turquoise glittered against a bronze tan in the afternoon light.

"I—I bought it."

"Sure you did," said Will.

"I brought it with me on the trip. Ask my girl. She—"

Will stripped it off the arm and flung it into the shallow grave. "You want to get out of this alive, kiddo? That kind of work can be traced. Or didn't you think of that? You didn't think, did you? What else did you steal from him while you were at it yesterday? Is that why he came back last night? Is it?"

"Lookit, man, where do you get off—"

"We all hang together," said Will, "or we all hang together. Get it?"

He got to his knees to close the sack. As an afterthought, he reached deep and rifled the dead child's pockets for anything that might tie in with Quintas Papagayo.

His hand stopped. He withdrew a wad of paper money that fell open, a flower on his palm. A roll of American dollars, traveler's

checks, credit cards.

"Hey, that's—"

"I had eight bucks on me when—"

Martin joined him in examining the roll. The checks were signed NORMAN WINSLOW. Two of the cards, embossed on the front and signed on the back, read JACK MARTIN.

"*Knew* I was right!" said the one in the felt hat. "Fuck if I wasn't! Lookit that! The little son of a bitch . . ."

MARTIN STRAIGHT-ARMED THE wheel, running in darkness.

He reminded himself of the five-dollar bill clipped to the back of his license. Then he remembered that his wallet was flat, except for the credit cards. Motorcycle cops passed him like fugitive Hell's Angels. He kicked on the lights of his rented car and thought of the last news tape of the great Karl Wallenda. He had been running, too, though in wind, not fog, toward or away from something.

Did he look back, I wonder? Was that why it happened?

. . . Heading for the end, his last that day was weak. Or maybe he looked ahead that once, saw it was the same, and just gave up the ghost. No, not Wallenda. For him the game was running while pretending not to—or the other way around. Was that his private joke? Even in Puerto Rico, for him the walk was all. *Keep your head clear*, he wanted to tell Wallenda. For that was how it finished, stopping to consider. But Wallenda must have known; he had been walking for years. Still he should have remembered . . . Martin put on his brights, gripped the steering wheel, and made for the border.

He turned on the radio, found an American station.

It was playing a song by a group called The Tubes. He remembered the Tivoli Night Club, the elevated band playing "Around the World" and "A Kiss to Build a Dream on." He remembered Hussong's Cantina, the knife fight that happened, his

trip to the Blow Hole, *policia* with short hair and semiautomatic rifles. The house trailers parked on the Point, the Point obscured by mist. The military guns with silencers . . .

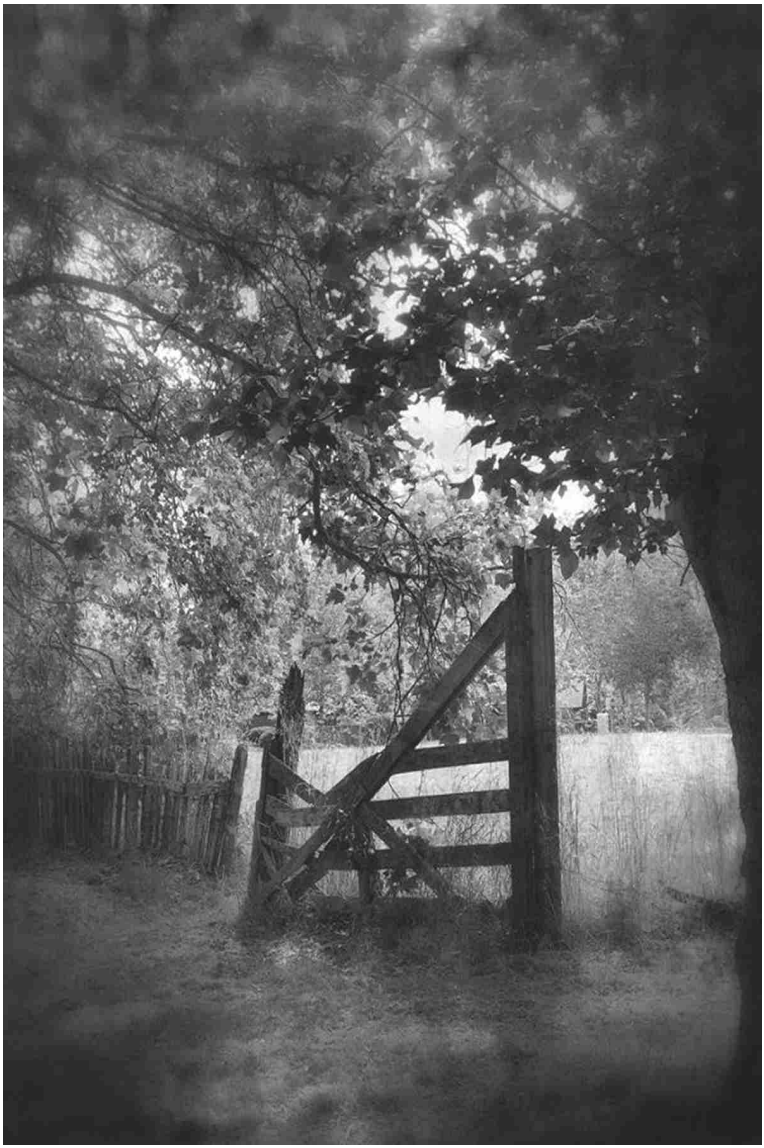
The doll whose parts had been severed, its eyes opening in moonlight.

Shaking, he turned his mind to what lay ahead. He wanted to see someone; he tried to think of her face. Her eyes would find his there under the beam ceiling; the spider plants in the corners growing into the carpet; the waves on Malibu beach; the Pleiades as bright, shining on what was below: the roots between the rocks, the harbor lights like eyes, the anemones closed inward, gourds and giant mushrooms, the endless pull of riptide, the seagulls white as death's-heads, the police with trimmed moustaches, the dark ships at anchor . . .

He came to a bridge on the tollway. Ahead lay the border.

To his right a sign, a turnoff that would take him back into Baja.

He sat with the motor running, trying to pick a direction.



ANCIENT LIGHTS

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

British author Algernon Blackwood (1869–1951) is now widely acknowledged as one of the progenitors of what we now call "folk horror," in no small way thanks to his two best-known and most widely reprinted stories, "The Willows" (1907) and "The Wendigo" (1910).

His supernatural fiction is collected in such volumes as *The Empty House and Other Ghost Stories*, *The Listener and Other Stories*, *John Silence Physician Extraordinary*, *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories*, *The Willows and Other Queer Tales*, *Ancient Sorceries and Other Tales*, *The Dance of Death and Other Tales*, *Strange Stories*, *The Doll and One Other* from Arkham House, and *Tales of the Uncanny and Supernatural*, to name only a few.

"My fundamental interest, I suppose, is signs and proofs of other powers that lie hidden in us all," the author wrote in a letter, "the extension, in other words, of human faculty. So many of my stories, therefore, deal with extension of consciousness; speculative and imaginative treatment of possibilities outside our normal range of consciousness . . . . Also, all that happens in our universe is natural; under Law; but an extension of our so limited normal consciousness can reveal new, extra-

ordinary powers, etc., and the word ‘supernatural’ seems the best word for treating these in fiction. I believe it possible for our consciousness to change and grow, and that with this change we may become aware of a new universe. A ‘change’ in consciousness, in its type, I mean, is something more than a mere extension of what we already possess and know.”

“Ancient Lights” was first published in 1912, and despite being reprinted in Blackwood’s early collections *Ten Minute Stories* and *Strange Stories*, it remains one of his more unfamiliar tales. However, it is no less powerful for that.

FROM SOUTHWATER, WHERE he left the train, the road led due west. That he knew; for the rest he trusted to luck, being one of those born walkers who dislike asking the way. He had that instinct, and as a rule it served him well. “A mile or so due west along the sandy road till you come to a stile on the right; then across the fields. You’ll see the red house straight before you.” He glanced at the postcard’s instructions once again, and once again he tried to decipher the scratched-out sentence—without success. It had been so elaborately inked over that no word was legible. Inked-out sentences in a letter were always enticing. He wondered what it was that had to be so very carefully obliterated.

The afternoon was boisterous, with a tearing, shouting wind that blew from the sea, across the Sussex Weald. Massive clouds with rounded, piled-up edges cannoned across gaping spaces of blue sky. Far away the line of Downs swept the horizon, like an arriving wave. Chanctonbury Ring rode their crest—a scudding ship, hull down before the wind. He took his hat off and walked rapidly, breathing great drafts of air with delight and exhilaration. The road was deserted; no horsemen, bicycles, or motors; not even a tradesman’s cart; no single walker. But anyhow he would never

have asked the way. Keeping a sharp eye for the stile, he pounded along, while the wind tossed the cloak against his face, and made waves across the blue puddles in the yellow road. The trees showed their underleaves of white. The bracken and the high new grass bent all one way. Great life was in the day, high spirits and dancing everywhere. And for a Croydon surveyor's clerk just out of an office this was like a holiday at the sea.

It was a day for high adventure, and his heart rose up to meet the mood of Nature. His umbrella with the silver ring ought to have been a sword, and his brown shoes should have been top-boots with spurs upon the heels. Where hid the enchanted Castle and the princess with the hair of sunny gold? His horse . . .

The stile came suddenly into view and nipped adventure in the bud. Everyday clothes took him prisoner again. He was a surveyor's clerk, middle-aged, earning three pounds a week, coming from Croydon to see about a client's proposed alterations in a wood—something to ensure a better view from the dining-room window. Across the fields, perhaps a mile away, he saw the red house gleaming in the sunshine; and resting on the stile a moment to get his breath he noticed a copse of oak and hornbeam on the right. "Aha," he told himself, "so that must be the wood he wants to cut down to improve the view? I'll 'ave a look at it." There were boards up, of course, but there was an inviting little path as well. "I'm not a trespasser," he said; "it's part of my business, this is." He scrambled awkwardly over the gate and entered the copse. A little round would bring him to the field again.

But the moment he passed among the trees the wind ceased shouting and a stillness dropped upon the world. So dense was the growth that the sunshine only came through in isolated patches. The air was close. He mopped his forehead and put his green felt hat on, but a low branch knocked it off again at once, and as he stooped an elastic twig swung back and stung his face. There were flowers along both edges of the little path; glades opened on either

side; ferns curved about in damper corners, and the smell of earth and foliage was rich and sweet. It was cooler here. What an enchanting little wood, he thought, turning down a small green glade where the sunshine flickered like silver wings. How it danced and fluttered and moved about! He put a dark blue flower in his buttonhole. Again his hat, caught by an oak branch as he rose, was knocked from his head, falling across his eyes. And this time he did not put it on again. Swinging his umbrella, he walked on with uncovered head, whistling rather loudly as he went. But the thickness of the trees hardly encouraged whistling, and something of his gaiety and high spirits seemed to leave him. He suddenly found himself treading circumspectly and with caution. The stillness in the wood was so peculiar.

There was a rustle among the ferns and leaves and something shot across the path ten yards ahead, stopped abruptly an instant with head cocked sideways to stare, then dived again beneath the underbrush with the speed of a shadow. He started like a frightened child, laughing the next second that a mere pheasant could have made him jump. In the distance he heard wheels upon the road, and wondered why the sound was pleasant. “Good old butcher’s cart,” he said to himself—then realized that he was going in the wrong direction and had somehow got turned round. For the road should be behind him, not in front.

And he hurriedly took another narrow glade that lost itself in greenness to the right. “That’s my direction, of course,” he said; “the trees has mixed me up a bit, it seems”—then found himself abruptly by the gate he had first climbed over. He had merely made a circle. Surprise became almost discomfiture then. And a man, dressed like a gamekeeper in browny green, leaned against the gate, hitting his legs with a switch. “I’m making for Mr. Lumley’s farm,” explained the walker. “This is his wood, I believe —” then stopped dead, because it was no man at all, but merely an effect of light and shade and foliage. He stepped back to reconstruct the singular illusion, but the wind shook the branches

roughly here on the edge of the wood and the foliage refused to reconstruct the figure. The leaves all rustled strangely. And just then the sun went behind a cloud, making the whole wood look otherwise. Yet how the mind could be thus doubly deceived was indeed remarkable, for it almost seemed to him the man had answered, spoken—or was this the shuffling noise the branches made ?—and had pointed with his switch to the noticeboard upon the nearest tree. The words rang on in his head, but of course he had imagined them: "No, it's not his wood. It's ours." And some village wit, moreover, had changed the lettering on the weather-beaten board, for it read quite plainly, TRESPASSERS WILL BE PERSECUTED.

And while the astonished clerk read the words and chuckled, he said to himself, thinking what a tale he'd have to tell his wife and children later—"The blooming wood has tried to chuck me out. But I'll go in again. Why, it's only a matter of a square acre at most. I'm bound to reach the fields on the other side if I keep straight on." He remembered his position in the office. He had a certain dignity to maintain.

The cloud passed from below the sun, and light splashed suddenly in all manner of unlikely places. The man went straight on. He felt a touch of puzzling confusion somewhere; this way the copse had of shifting from sunshine into shadow doubtless troubled sight a little. To his relief at last, a new glade opened through the trees and disclosed the fields with a glimpse of the red house in the distance at the far end. But a little wicket gate that stood across the path had first to be climbed, and as he scrambled heavily over—for it would not open—he got the astonishing feeling that it slid off sideways beneath his weight, and toward the wood. Like the moving staircases at Harrod's and Earl's Court, it began to glide off with him. It was quite horrible. He made a violent effort to get down before it carried him into the trees, but his feet became entangled with the bars and umbrella, so that he fell heavily upon the farther side, arms spread across the grass and

nettles, boots clutched between the first and second bars. He lay there a moment like a man crucified upside down, and while he struggled to get disentangled—feet, bars, and umbrella formed a regular net—he saw the little man in browny green go past him with extreme rapidity through the wood. The man was laughing. He passed across the glade some fifty yards away, and he was not alone this time. A companion like himself went with him. The clerk, now upon his feet again, watched them disappear into the gloom of green beyond. "They're tramps, not gamekeepers," he said to himself, half mortified, half angry. But his heart was thumping dreadfully, and he dared not utter all his thought.

He examined the wicket gate, convinced it was a trick gate some-how—then went hurriedly on again, disturbed beyond belief to see that the glade no longer opened into fields, but curved away to the right. What in the world had happened to him? His sight was so utterly at fault. Again the sun flamed out abruptly and lit the floor of the wood with pools of silver, and at the same moment a violent gust of wind passed shouting overhead. Drops fell clattering everywhere upon the leaves, making a sharp pattering as of many footsteps. The whole copse shuddered and went moving.

"Rain, by George," thought the clerk, and feeling for his umbrella, discovered he had lost it. He turned back to the gate and found it lying on the farther side. To his amazement he saw the fields at the far end of the glade, the red house, too, ashine in the sunset. He laughed then, for, of course, in his struggle with the gate, he had somehow got turned around—had fallen back instead of forward. Climbing over, this time quite easily, he retraced his steps. The silver band, he saw, had been torn from the umbrella. No doubt his foot, a nail, or something had caught in it and ripped it off. The clerk began to run; he felt extraordinarily dismayed.

But, while he ran, the entire wood ran with him, round him, to and fro, trees shifting like living things, leaves folding and unfolding, trunks darting backward and forward, and branches

disclosing enormous empty spaces, then closing up again before he could look into them. There were footsteps everywhere, and laughing, crying voices, and crowds of figures gathering just behind his back till the glade, he knew, was thick with moving life. The wind in his ears, of course, produced the voices and the laughter, while sun and clouds, plunging the copse alternately in shadow and bright dazzling light, created the figures. But he did not like it, and went as fast as ever his sturdy legs could take him. He was frightened now. This was no story for his wife and children. He ran like the wind. But his feet made no sound upon the soft mossy turf.

Then, to his horror, he saw that the glade grew narrow, nettles and weeds stood thick across it, it dwindled down into a tiny path, and twenty yards ahead it stopped finally and melted off among the trees. What the trick gate had failed to achieve, this twisting glade accomplished easily—carried him in bodily among the dense and crowding trees.

There was only one thing to do—turn sharply and dash back again, run headlong into the life that followed at his back, followed so closely too that now it almost touched him, pushing him in. And with reckless courage this was what he did. It seemed a fearful thing to do. He turned with a sort of violent spring, head down and shoulders forward, hands stretched before his face. He made the plunge; like a hunted creature he charged full tilt the other way, meeting the wind now in his face.

Good Lord! The glade behind him had closed up as well; there was no longer any path at all. Turning round and round, like an animal at bay, he searched for an opening, a way of escape, searched frantically, breathlessly, terrified now in his bones. But foliage surrounded him, branches blocked the way; the trees stood close and still, unshaken by a breath of wind; and the sun dipped that moment behind a great black cloud. The entire wood turned dark and silent. It watched him.

Perhaps it was this final touch of sudden blackness that made

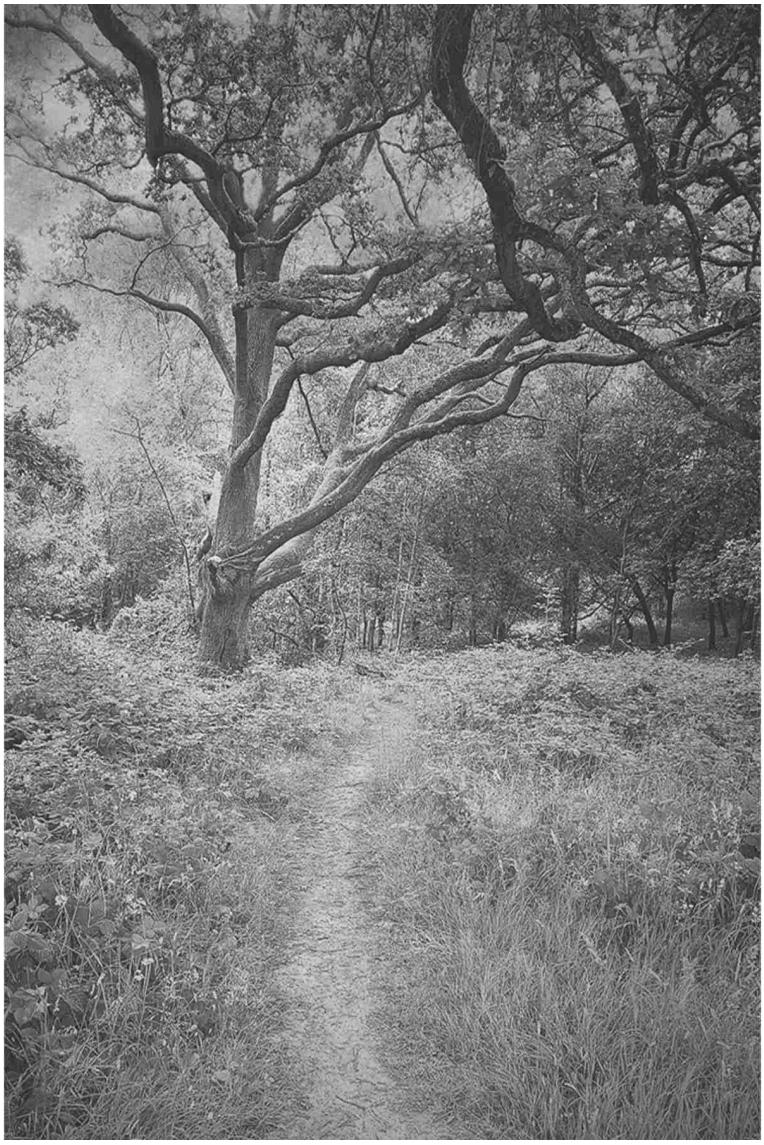
him act so foolishly, as though he had really lost his head. At any rate, without pausing to think, he dashed headlong in among the trees again. There was a sensation of being stiflingly surrounded and entangled, and that he must break out at all costs—out and away into the open of the blessed fields and air. He did this ill-considered thing, and apparently charged straight into an oak that deliberately moved into his path to stop him. He saw it shift across a good full yard, and being a measuring man, accustomed to theodolite and chain, he ought to know. He fell, saw stars, and felt a thousand tiny fingers tugging and pulling at his hands and neck and ankles. The stinging nettles, no doubt, were responsible for this. He thought of it later. At the moment it felt diabolically calculated.

But another remarkable illusion was not so easily explained. For all in a moment, it seemed, the entire wood went sliding past him with a thick deep rustling of leaves and laughter, myriad footsteps, and tiny little active, energetic shapes; two men in browny green gave him a mighty hoist—and he opened his eyes to find himself lying in the meadow beside the stile where first his incredible adventure had begun. The wood stood in its usual place and stared down upon him in the sunlight. There was the red house in the distance as before. Above him grinned the weather-beaten noticeboard: TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

Disheveled in mind and body, and a good deal shaken in his official soul, the clerk walked slowly across the fields. But on the way he glanced once more at the postcard of instructions, and saw with dull amazement that the inked-out sentence was quite legible after all beneath the scratches made across it: *There is a short cut through the wood—the wood I want cut down—if you care to take it*. Only "care" was so badly written, it looked more like another word; the "c" was uncommonly like "d."

"That's the copse that spoils my view of the Downs, you see," his client explained to him later, pointing across the fields, and referring to the ordnance map beside him. "I want it cut down and

a path made so and so." His finger indicated direction on the map. "The Fairy Wood—it's still called, and it's far older than this house. Come now, if you're ready, Mr. Thomas, we might go out and have a look at it . . ."



PORSON'S PIECE

REGGIE OLIVER

Reggie Oliver is an actor, director, playwright, and award-winning author of fiction. Published work includes six plays, three novels, an illustrated children's book, eight volumes of short stories—including *Mrs Midnight* (winner of the Children of the Night Award for Best Work of Supernatural Fiction)—and the biography of English author Stella Gibbons, *Out of the Woodshed*.

His stories have appeared in more than eighty anthologies and have been collected in such retrospective volumes as *Dramas from the Depths*, *Shadow Plays*, and *The Sea of Blood*. His most recent collections of "strange" stories include *The Ballet of Dr Caligari and Madder Mysteries*, *A Maze for the Minotaur*, and *Stages of Fear*, the latter a collection of his theatrical tales of terror. His story "Flowers of the Sea" was included in The Folio Society's *Folio Book of Horror Stories* along with such luminaries of the genre as Poe, Lovecraft, and M. R. James. He is also an illustrator and has recently contributed artwork to collections by Anna Taborska and Robert Shearman.

"I met the philosopher Sir Alfred ("Freddie") Ayer when I was at Oxford in the 1970s," the author recalls,

"finding him charming and delightful company; and I also went to his lectures. He was a staunch atheist—very much the Richard Dawkins of his day—but toward the end of his life, while undergoing an operation, he had an experience that, temporarily, made him revise his convictions (or lack of them).

"I have always been fascinated by this incident, as I have with stories from the area where I live, near Saxmundham in Suffolk, of people seeing the spirits of the dead dancing in a particular field on summer evenings. No explanation, but the legend persists—thus proving yet again that there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your (or Sir Freddie Ayer's) philosophy."

I CAN'T REMEMBER exactly when I first had the idea for *Last Thoughts* but it rapidly became an obsession with me. Originally it was going to be called *Philosophical Conclusions*, though when I submitted the proposal to the commissioning editor of Radio Documentaries, she said that sounded too ponderous and academic. Reluctantly I have to agree, but at the time I thought it was symptomatic of the BBC's relentless urge to "dumb down." Naturally, I did not use that expression to her. Even to mention such a phrase as "dumbing down" at the BBC is to invite the accusation of "elitism": another anathema of the Corporation, volubly opposed, yet covertly practiced.

The "concept," to use our jargon, was for a series of half-hour programs in which prominent but now retired academic philosophers, nearing the end of their earthly existence, were asked to give their final verdicts on Life, Death, God, whatever, and to say whether in old age their views had been modified or matured. One of the reasons my proposal had found favor was that I had already sounded out two very distinguished philosophers,

Dame Felicity Regan and Professor Garstang, and obtained their provisional agreement to feature on the program. There was, however, one person whom I really wanted to include, but who proved more elusive: Sir Bernard Wilkes.

When I had been at Oxford thirty years before, "Bernie" Wilkes was the man. He was head of the leading school of "Rational Positivist" philosophy that held sway then, and, for all I know, still does. He was a brilliant lecturer and tutor, and though he did have a reputation as a womanizer, that was something that was less frowned upon then than it is now. In those days, affairs, even with students young enough to be your daughter, were condoned, provided that one did not persist in unwanted advances and maintained discretion. Sir Bernard kept to both these unwritten rules—I was going to say "religiously," but that, given his radical opposition to all things theological, would be inappropriate.

Male students of my acquaintance always expressed envious astonishment at the way he managed to "pull" some of the most glamorous women in Oxford. I was not personally drawn to him in that way, which was just as well because I was not the type of young woman he would be drawn to, but I could understand his attraction.

In appearance he was not immediately prepossessing, being rather short and having a large nose, but he was full of animation. Someone once described him as "a cross between a rodent and a firefly," which, strangely, does rather sum him up. His brown, somewhat prominent eyes, glittered with genial mischief. Most important of all, it was quite obvious that he actually *liked* women, not simply for their sexual possibilities, but for their company. At dinners and drinks parties, he would be talking to them in preference to any man, however distinguished. Once he was a guest at a philosophical dinner at my college, and during the sherry stage, I happened to find myself talking to him, one to one. For the brief duration of our exchange he somehow managed to convey to me that he thought I was the cleverest and most

delightful person in the room. Such charm and grace excuses much and is not easily forgotten.

However, I would not like it to be thought that it was some sort of unfinished emotional business that made me so anxious to seek out Sir Bernard. No. Let me make that quite clear. But Wilkes had, somehow, symbolized for me the freedom and intellectual openness of Oxford during a significant period in my young life.

Inquiries at his old college yielded the information that Sir Bernard had left Oxford five years ago and his forwarding address either could not or would not be supplied. Surely, I thought, it could not be that hard to track down such a prominent figure? Yet it was. In the end I had help from an unexpected quarter.

I happened to mention to Dame Felicity Regan that I was looking for him, and though I expected a sympathetic ear, which I received, I did not anticipate any actual assistance. Dame Felicity and Sir Bernard had had many public run-ins over the years, mainly because Dame Felicity is a Roman Catholic and Sir Bernard was of the view that any kind of religious belief was inconsistent with serious philosophical activity. However, it turned out that behind the scenes the two had got on reasonably well, at least in later years.

“When Bernie got married for the third time about ten years ago now,” Dame Felicity told me over the phone, “he was transformed. Alison Kentley, her name was, a graduate DPhil student he was mentoring, and yonks younger than him, of course, but she suited him and they were very much in love. He stopped his philandering altogether: they were amazingly happy. Alison was a remarkable person in many ways: even brought about a certain rapprochement between me and Bernie. *Not* what I expected. Then something terrible happened. Alison died very suddenly from a brain aneurysm. She was only thirty-five. Bernie was devastated. He felt he’d been offered the top prize in the lottery of life only to have it cruelly and unjustly snatched away from him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man (or woman) so angry.

I don't mean blowing his top, that sort of thing, but just deeply, permanently enraged. *Out*raged might be the mot juste. And of course the terrible thing was, you see, that there was no one he could be angry *with*. He couldn't be angry with God of course because he didn't believe in one. There are times when that is the whole point of there being a God: to have someone to be angry with. Not *at* you understand—that would be foolish—but *with*."

I failed to understand the distinction, but I trusted Dame Felicity to mean something by it. "So what happened?" I asked.

"He couldn't stand Oxford any longer after that, and he'd been such a sociable bird in his day. He was past the retiring age anyway, so he just withdrew altogether, making it as difficult as possible for anyone to get in touch. He bought a little house in the Cotswolds and has gone to live there, allowing only a few trusted people to know where he is, I being one of them for some reason. Since then he's made no public appearances, published nothing, never answers the few invitations that manage to reach him . . . I'm telling you all this because I think it's time he stopped being a recluse and you might just be the person to bring him back." And without any further discussion, she gave me Sir Bernard's telephone number. That is Dame Felicity for you.

SIR BERNARD WAS now in his early eighties, but his voice on the telephone was just as I remembered it from lectures thirty years before. And the delivery was the same: faultlessly articulated, but headlong and hurrying toward the end of each sentence, as if he had already worked out what he was going to say in the next and was impatient to get to it.

He listened without interrupting to my pitch about the program, there was a pause, and he asked me who else was going to be featured. I mentioned Garstang and Dame Felicity.

"Hmm." He seemed unimpressed. "I suppose it was *she* who gave you this number?"

“Yes.”

“Hmm.”

He then interrogated me closely about my work at the BBC, my marital status (single), my career at Oxford. From this conversation I caught a tiny whisper of the old charm. I did not feel invaded because he seemed genuinely interested in me as a person.

“Well,” he said at the end of it, “you’d better come down and see me. Come for lunch. But don’t bring any of your recording equipment. I haven’t decided to do this thing yet.” And he then gave me detailed instructions as to how to find his house: evidently news of the satnav had not reached him. His final words were: “You’ll find me rather remote.”

I could not decide whether a reference to his location, his psychological state, or a humorous allusion to both was intended. I chose not to laugh in case that might offend him and said I was looking forward to seeing him.

“Hmm!” And he rang off.

Lovers of irony will I suppose be amused by the fact that Sir Bernard lived in a house called the Old Rectory, in a village that went by the name of Bourton Monachorum, not far from Stow-on-the-Wold. Sir Bernard was a man who paid very little attention to his surroundings, so I am not sure that he was much bothered by the ecclesiastical connections. When I had asked him on the telephone about the name, he said he understood that there had been a Benedictine priory at Bourton before the Dissolution, hence the “Monachorum.” “There are some ruins somewhere in the village, I believe,” he said casually. “Haven’t seen them myself.”

I arrived by car on a May morning, shortly after a rainstorm. Everything was young and green and glistening. The village of Bourton stood on a slope of the Cotswold Ridge, with the Rectory on the lower edge of it, close to the church. It was a fine old seventeenth-century house of Cotswold stone standing in its own grounds, and I wondered if Sir Bernard had chosen it not simply

for its comparative remoteness, but also because its architecture, in miniature, was akin to a typical Oxford college.

The approach was up a gravel drive between trees that partially obscured the house. Despite the fact that the sun was now out and the trees were in their early summer panoply of fresh young green, the overall effect was slightly lowering. Had you not known, you might have guessed at a reclusive occupant.

The door was opened by a large middle-aged woman with a Gloucestershire accent whose "Come in, we have been expecting you" contained just a hint of menace.

"Sir Bernard is in the sitting room. I am Mrs. Jacks. I come in and do for him most days." She appeared to be anxious to establish that theirs was a respectable professional relationship. I nodded to confirm I understood. From somewhere I heard the sound of classical music. It was mid-eighteenth century, faintly familiar, but I could not quite place it.

"Sir Bernard likes his music," said Mrs. Jacks, as if she were talking about a teenage son with an addiction to heavy metal. She ushered me into the sitting room with the words: "She's arrived, Sir Bernard. Shall I get the lunch on?"

"Yes. Thank you, Mrs. Jacks. Thank you so much."

A little smile and a nod from the hitherto unsmiling Mrs. Jacks was enough to tell me that even she had fallen under his spell. She left the room.

"How nice to meet you again after all these years, Jane." I had told him in our telephone conversation of our previous brief encounter. "Would you mind awfully turning the music off for me. The far left black button in the thing on the sideboard." He pointed and I obeyed. "Thank you. Gluck's *Orfeo*," he added.

I had already guessed because, before I had switched it off, I heard the opening bars of "Che farò senza Euridice?"

Sir Bernard Wilkes was much as I remembered him, though smaller than in my imagination, and of course much lined and with white hair. The liveliness was still apparent, though, and—I

don't think this was merely because of what Dame Felicity had told me—I saw sadness in the eyes. He was sitting in a comfortable bucket swivel armchair of a classic 1960s design. The room was entirely equipped with modernist furnishings, which, though attractive and of high quality in themselves, looked curiously out of place in a seventeenth-century oak-paneled parlor. The few pictures were mostly nondescript prints of Oxford, but above the fireplace was a large framed black-and-white photograph, a head-and-shoulders portrait of a woman in her thirties. She was laughing, and the effect was immediately captivating. Behind her loomed the out-of-focus form of the Radcliffe Camera.

"Yes. That's Alison," said Sir Bernard, noticing that my eye had been drawn to it. After that he made no further reference to her, but he talked abundantly. Once he had started, the flow was unstoppable, and it went on through lunch, at which he ate very little and drank next to nothing, though an excellent Pouilly-Fumé was on offer for my benefit. It was not that he monopolized the conversation—he was constantly asking me questions and soliciting my views—but his need to communicate was strong; at times, it seemed to me, almost desperate. He kept to topics outside himself: politics, the arts, the latest developments in science and ideas, and rarely made any reference to his present situation. He was a lonely man refusing to admit to his own loneliness.

Briefly we discussed the program we were going to make. I outlined some of the questions I would ask him and he raised no objections to them, even nodded his approval occasionally. That was what I had come for, so by the end of the meal, I felt that my task was done and I was ready to take my leave. But as we were finishing our coffee, Sir Bernard suddenly said:

"I thought we might have a walk after lunch. I nearly always do. Keeps me going. Exercise, you know."

He looked at me eagerly and I thought it impolitic to refuse.

"They tell me the countryside around here is very—" He

searched for a word and finally lighted on: "—picturesque." It was typical of his intellectual austerity that he would not commit himself to an aesthetic judgement of his own.

We were in the hall, while he put on a cap and chose a walking stick from the umbrella stand, when Mrs. Jacks emerged from her kitchen domain. Sir Bernard seemed startled by her appearance, even nervous.

"Just going for a walk, Mrs. Jacks," he said. "Showing Jane here a bit of your countryside. Delicious lunch by the way. Delicious."

Mrs. Jacks frowned. "Now, Sir Bernard, you won't be taking her down by—"

"No, no, no! Not to worry. We'll be fine. Won't be long. Cup of tea when we get back. Come along, Jane!" And with that we were out of the door before Mrs. Jacks could respond.

Once out of the sphere of Mrs. Jacks' influence, Sir Bernard relaxed a little. We went down the drive then up the winding main street of the village, flanked by ancient stone houses with cottage gardens that were beginning to come into bloom. Sir Bernard did not walk fast, but he walked steadily, and seemed undaunted by the slope. It was an impressive performance for a man in his eighties.

"Picturesque, you see," he said gesturing, but not looking, at the houses to his left and right. We said little until we had almost reached the top of the village, when he indicated a footpath to our left with his stick.

"This is where we turn off," he said. "We will come back to the Rectory by a different route."

The footpath, much overgrown, passed between two drystone walls that encircled village gardens. Sir Bernard, plodding ahead of me, began to hum. It sounded like one of the dances of the Blessed Spirits from *Orfeo*, but he stopped abruptly when we came to a narrow sunken lane that crossed the end of the footpath at a right angle. Pointing to his left, Sir Bernard said, "We go down this

way."

The path was of beaten earth and, because of the rain we had had that morning, somewhat slippery and treacherous in parts. Was this what Mrs. Jacks had tried to warn him against?

The lane, gouged out of the surrounding landscape and quite steeply sloping, was fringed on both sides by trees. To our left were the back garden walls of cottages we had passed on our way up; to our right we caught glimpses of fields beyond the oaks and beeches that spread their dappled shade over the path. The air was close and still. A few insects hummed, but no birds sang. Despite the sun above, I felt a certain oppression in the atmosphere, but Sir Bernard did not appear to be so affected.

"This path is called Churchyard Lane. When the villagers died, they were traditionally brought down this way to enter the graveyard on the south side of the church. I don't think it still happens."

Having delivered this piece of information, Sir Bernard proceeded on his way, stopping only when he came to a gap in the fringe of trees. Through it there was a view up a gentle slope of sunlit meadow. The grass was long and uncropped, and wild flowers such as poppies, buttercups, and cornflowers abounded. Sir Bernard pointed at it with his stick without himself looking at it.

"That field there is called Porson's Piece," he said. I wondered why my attention had been drawn to this pleasant but unremarkable stretch of land. "Nobody knows who it belongs to. Generally thought to be some sort of common land, but the name implies it was once owned by someone, presumably called Porson; though that could be a corruption of 'parson.' In which case it could belong to the Church—or indeed to me, I suppose, since I own the Rectory." He gave a short laugh. Still he did not look at the field, but examined my face as I did. "Occasionally a local farmer grazes his cattle on it, but rarely in the summer months. Mostly it's left alone. Hence the wild flowers, as you can see." He

paused. I nodded. “Butterflies later on in the summer. Interesting local feature. Well, onward, onward!” And without turning to look at Porson’s Piece he began to move on down Churchyard Lane. I was beginning to be troubled by his behavior.

We had come almost to the bottom of the lane when Sir Bernard started to talk again.

“As you may have gathered, I am not usually very susceptible to scenery. It was once said of me that when I thought of New York, I would picture in my head a sign with the words new york written on it, and that images of the Empire State Building, Central Park, Statue of Liberty, so on, so on, which apparently occur to most people when they think of that city, were entirely absent from my mind. That is of course quite untrue. I have never said any such thing. It is a myth, but like many myths—*some* myths—there is an element of truth in it. I tend not to think in visual images, more in—” He paused for a moment in his headlong delivery. “—Concepts, I suppose. The visual arts, painting, sculpture, so on, even architecture, don’t mean very much to me. Music on the other hand . . . that is why it is so strange that . . . . Tell me, what is it that *you* think in mainly? Images? Sounds? Concepts? Algebraic equations? Is that a meaningful question to ask?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I just think in—thoughts.”

“Aha! Ha! Very good answer. But tautologous of course. What I mean is, how do your thoughts appear to you? Are they—” We had somehow arrived back in front of the drive of the Old Rectory. Sir Bernard nodded and smiled at me, reassured by the familiarity of his surroundings. “Ah! Home again. A cup of tea?”

Mrs. Jacks stared at us searchingly when we entered the Rectory, and after she had brought us tea in the sitting room, Sir Bernard waited for some moments upon her leaving the room before he began to talk.

“I wonder . . . when I showed you Porson’s Piece, on our walk, did you see anything—unusual there?”

"No. Just a meadow with some rather nice wild flowers."

"Yes. Yes . . . nothing—else?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"Well, no reason really, but . . . it is rather odd. I'd been doing that walk down Churchyard Lane for some time—the one we did—and then, a couple of weeks ago, I was passing Porson's Piece when I saw something. It was still light, but getting toward evening, and there were people in the meadow, and they were dancing. Interesting, I suppose, but only slightly unusual except for two odd things. The first was that they were all in white. I mean everything—clothes, shoes, even their skin and hair. It was all the same white you see. But they were perfectly solid, as far as I could judge: I mean not translucent or transparent. Not like ghosts, you understand. Of course ghosts don't exist, but what I mean is, not like ghosts are imagined by some to be like." He paused, seemingly exhausted by his narrative efforts.

"And the other odd thing?"

"Ah, yes. This was even stranger, I suppose. They made no sound. No sound at all. There were these lines of them all holding hands and they wound round each other, moving quite slowly through the grass and the flowers. But in the middle of them was this man who looked as if he were playing a fiddle, and he was all in white too and his fiddle was also white—bow and everything—but the instrument made no sound at all. I must have watched it all for about a couple of minutes, possibly longer, but not much. Somehow I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. I thought it must be some kind of—joke; I don't know . . . but a nasty joke, if it was. Well, when I got back I naturally asked Mrs. Jacks about the dancers in Porson's Piece and she gave me a strange look and said that nobody went dancing in Porson's Piece. And then she said I should not go down Churchyard Lane again, and when I asked why, she wouldn't answer, but a few days later she gave me this book. Now, where is it?" He scrabbled among the papers on his desk until he found a small leather-bound book that he tossed over

to me. “You’ll find the relevant passage on page one hundred and sixty-five.”

The book, entitled *Ramblings in Old Gloucestershire*, had been written by a clergyman toward the end of the nineteenth century. The passage on page 165 had been heavily underscored in pencil, presumably by Sir Bernard.

> *In the picturesque village of Bourton Monachorum there is reputed to be a piece of land where, on summer afternoons and evenings, the Dead dance. This pleasant legend states that they are the spirits of those who have not been buried in hallowed ground and who are not good enough to enter Heaven, nor yet wicked enough to be cast into the flames of eternal torment. The worthy old beldame who told me this story would not reveal the precise location of the meadow, “For,” said she, “them as sees the dancers are not long for this world, but them as both sees* and *hears them will perish at the coming of the next new moon after they hears them.” It is a commonly held belief in these parts, but I have encountered it nowhere else in the county.*

“All nonsense, of course!” said Sir Bernard as soon as I had finished reading. “I suppose it must have been some sort of hallucination on my part. And somewhere or other in a book or whatever at some time in the past I had picked up that old legend and it had lodged in my subconscious only to emerge later on. That is the only rational explanation.” After a long hesitation he added, “—But the thing is, I’ve seen those dancers a couple of times since in Porson’s Piece.”

“But not heard them?”

“No. No! Not heard, thank—thankfully. It is all quite absurd, but what is really—*annoying*, you might say, is that it should happen in this way. I am perfectly aware that certain people—especially at the beginning and end of their lives—have what are

called ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ experiences. The great William James, as you know, wrote a book about it, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. And I am prepared to concede, with James, that these experiences, though not of course real in any . . . real sense, have a certain value—‘cash value’ as William James liked to put it. That is, they offer consolation, reassurance, freedom from fear of death, so on, so on. And if I had had such an experience, akin, say, to those described by Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey* or *The Prelude*—oceanic feelings of oneness with an Eternal Being, or whatever—I would have been prepared to accept it as part of some kind of evolutionary process connected with old age. And appropriate to my intellect. But *this*! I mean, it’s a folk legend of some kind. It’s so ridiculous! So trivial! Dancing dead people? I mean, really!”

“Do you think you should see a psychiatrist about it?”

“No, no, no! Never had any time for shrinks. Psychology is a pseudo-science, posited on a mind–body duality, which is totally invalid.”

“Perhaps you should simply take Mrs. Jacks’s advice and not go down Churchyard Lane anymore.”

“Maybe . . . maybe . . . but why should I give in to this nonsense? It would be as if I believed it. Well, there we are! I expect you want to be on your way. Perhaps talking it out with you has cured me. Isn’t ‘the talking cure’ all the rage these days in shrink circles? Maybe it’s done the trick.”

Soon after that, I left, having fixed a date for recording an interview with him at the Old Rectory.

THREE WEEKS LATER I came to record my interview. It was now June and high summer. At Sir Bernard’s insistence we sat outside on the front lawn to do our talk. It suited me as it provided the opportunity for one of those classic introductions, so beloved of radio presenters:

I am sitting here in a beautiful garden somewhere in Gloucestershire. The sun is shining: it is a perfect English summer day, and with me is Sir Bernard Wilkes, Grand Old Man of British philosophy, and founder of the influential and controversial Rational Positivist school of thinking . . .

As a matter of fact, it was not a particularly beautiful garden, just a well-mown lawn fringed by a few desultory bushes and trees. There were no flowers or exotic plants as Sir Bernard's interest in horticulture was minimal. However, I was able to obtain a "wild track" of a few birds twittering, which supplied the requisite aural atmosphere for our discussion.

Sir Bernard seemed relaxed, but perhaps a little subdued. When he talked he was as fluent as ever, but his eloquent paragraphs were interspersed by quite long pauses in which he did not look as if he were engaged in concentrated thought. He stared around the garden, apparently listening for something. Occasionally he would look toward the house where, once, I saw Mrs. Jacks staring anxiously out at us from the dining-room window.

When I asked Sir Bernard about his achievements he said, "Of course I got a lot of things wrong, as one does. Most things, perhaps. I never really, to my satisfaction, sorted out the Verification Principle, for example. But I think the spirit of Rational Positivism was the right one. Has one been influential? Impossible to tell. Maybe one has moved philosophical thinking a few inches in the appropriate direction, I don't know . . ." I don't believe his modesty was assumed.

Finally I had the courage to ask him, "Sir Bernard, you are now in your eighties, and nearing the end of your life. How do you, as a philosopher, view the prospect of death?"

There was a longer pause than usual, during which Sir Bernard gave a slight start when a blackbird suddenly began to sing quite close by. I was to keep most of that pause in when I edited the recording.

"Death?" he said finally. "Death? Well, of course, death doesn't

exist. It is a concept, like God, which is frequently used, but has no real meaning, because it is simply an absence, a nonexistence. There is *dying*, a process with which we are all familiar, and one may fear, or be apprehensive about that process. But death itself? There is, quite literally, nothing to fear."

"*No rational being can fear a thing he will not feel*."

"Exactly."

"But doesn't Larkin in the same poem say that it is precisely this absence of feeling that we *do* fear, whether it is rational to do so or not?"

"Ah, well! Larkin was a poet, not a philosopher, you see!" He laughed. "A very good one, so I'm told. Didn't he also say: 'What will survive of us is love'? An admirable sentiment, a nice expression of feeling, but hardly—hardly verifiable in the philosophical sense."

I had to press him: "But have you had no experiences recently that have made you revise the idea that death is simply a cutoff point?"

Sir Bernard shot me an angry glance. I thought for a moment he was going to terminate the interview and storm off in disgust at my impertinence, but he stayed seated. He turned his face upward to the sky and stared long at the cloudless blue.

Finally he spoke, dreamily at first, then gathering momentum in his old familiar manner. "Well . . . one has experiences of course. Strange experiences of all kinds, which are not to be discounted. No experience is invalid, only the interpretation placed upon it. For example, an alcoholic in the condition known as delirium tremens may say to you: 'I saw a pink rat.' And he would be telling the truth, but you must not infer from that that there *are* such things as pink rats, only that some alcoholics *see* pink rats. Thus the validity of all sense experiences is conditional upon the meaning one gives it. Or one does not give it. To put a metaphysical gloss on some sense experience is to rob it of its true meaning, which may simply be that one has had that experience.

If philosophy has any purpose, it must be as much to strip experience of any false significance rather than to confer it. To apply, as it were, Ockham's razor to the cheek of circumstance and scrape away the stubble of superstition."

After that Sir Bernard fell silent. He knew better than to try to add to this peroration. A stillness followed, untouched by so much as the trill of a bird or the hum of an insect. The sunlit garden was serene. Then Sir Bernard started violently.

"What was that?"

"What?"

"Did you hear that just now? I thought I heard music. Solo violin. Bit like a Paganini *Caprice* or something."

"I can't say I did."

"Must have been Mrs. Jacks indoors playing one of my CDs. Yes, that must be it. Well, are you finished with me?"

I congratulated him on an excellent interview. I stayed awhile after that because Sir Bernard seemed reluctant to let me go, but eventually I told him I must leave because I did not want to drive back to London in the dark. As I was going, I found myself for a moment alone with Mrs. Jacks in the hall.

"Mrs. Jacks," I said, "while we were doing the interview in the garden, did you play any of Sir Bernard's music on the CD player?"

Mrs. Jacks looked shocked. "Oh, no! I wouldn't do that! Mind you, I like a good hymn—I'm Strict Baptist, you see—but I don't go in for all that music."

As I drove away from the Old Rectory that evening, Sir Bernard stood on the drive waving my car goodbye, with Mrs. Jacks at his side towering over him. It was the last time I saw him alive, and he looked strangely forlorn.

A FEW WEEKS later I was working on the program in one of the editing suites at the BBC when I had a call on my phone from

Dame Felicity Regan. She told me that Sir Bernard had died quite suddenly the previous afternoon. He had had a heart seizure while walking in Churchyard Lane.

"There is going to be a grand memorial service at Oxford in a few weeks' time, of course, but I think you ought to come to the funeral proper," she said. "It's going to be a cremation in Cheltenham. I don't really approve of cremations, as you know, being RC, but that's what he wanted apparently. There won't be many there, but I think he would have wanted *you* to put in an appearance. The last time I talked to him on the phone, only a couple of nights before he died, he spoke about you with some affection." She waited for my reaction, which was an astonished silence. "I know. I was surprised too."

The service at the crematorium was as dismal as I had expected it to be. The officiating clergyman had not known Sir Bernard, and was obviously embarrassed about conducting the funeral of a notorious atheist. After the committal, we, that is Dame Felicity, half a dozen assorted Oxford dons, and a distant cousin of the deceased, drove the twenty or so miles back to Bourton Monachorum where Mrs. Jacks had tea, sherry, and sandwiches waiting for us. At the wake I did not feel much like talking, and I quickly felt very superfluous when the dons got into a huddle to plan the splendors of the Oxford memorial service.

It was another fine summer day, if a little blowy. I went out onto the empty lawn; then, feeling the need to put even more distance between myself and the academics, I wandered down the drive and into Churchyard Lane. I wanted to be still and remember Sir Bernard, but a restlessness kept me on the move. I began to walk up Churchyard Lane.

Presently I found myself at the gap in the line of trees, which marked the spot from which Porson's Piece could be seen. The sun was beginning to decline into the west, sending slanted golden rays across the meadow, now strewn with wild flowers: purple vetch and willow herb, comfrey, campion, and blood-red poppies.

They waved and glittered in the breeze.

Then at the very top of the field something white appeared, which moved quicker than anything caught by the wind. It seemed to bob up and down, appearing above the tops of the grass and then vanishing again, finally resolving itself into a chain of white objects that rose and fell in an undulating motion. It began to come closer, and I could see now that it was a line of dancers all in white.

The dancers wove their serpentine way down the field toward the sunken lane. They were, as Sir Bernard had described, white, dead white all over and perfectly solid in appearance, except that the evening mist, which wreathed the grass of the field, sometimes obscured their feet. There was nothing overtly threatening about these figures—they seemed too absorbed in their own convoluted movements to threaten anyone—but their sheer strangeness terrified me. I felt my heart banging in my chest, and because the world was silent and the tread of their feet made no sound, the noise of the heartbeat and the rush of blood through veins and ventricles filled my ears. I could not move from where I stood, and they were weaving their way toward me, chains of men and women in white, holding hands, dancing down the meadow. As they came closer, I began to distinguish their clothes and their features. They were all different: they belonged to no one period or type; only the same dead whiteness of their garments and exposed skin gave them a dreadful uniformity. At the end of one of the lines of dancers, one man, I noticed, was stumbling slightly, evidently not as used to the steps as the rest. This line began to make a wide sweep around the field, folding the other dancers into closer concentric circles, until the stumbling end-man came down the slight incline toward me where I stood in the lane.

The man had his back to me at first, but the line of dancers he was holding on to swung him around so that I saw him full face, and so close I could almost have reached out to touch him. It was Sir Bernard, all white, even his eyes, which stared at me blankly

like the eyes of a marble statue. He extended his free arm and gestured to me, as if inviting me to join him. He opened his mouth to cry out, but no voice could be heard, and a moment later he was pulled away, stumbling into the lines of souls as they swayed in endless circles around each other.

I thought I heard the scrape of a fiddle. I was probably mistaken. I almost certainly was, but I could take no chances. Covering my ears, I ran headlong down Churchyard Lane back to the Old Rectory, as the men and women of Porson's Piece danced on through the twilight.

THE FOURTH CALL

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* describes Ramsey Campbell as "Britain's most respected living horror writer." He has been given more awards than any other writer in the field, including the Grand Master Award of the World Horror Convention, the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Horror Writers Association, the Living Legend Award of the International Horror Guild, and the World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2015 he was made an Honorary Fellow of Liverpool John Moores University for outstanding services to literature.

Among his novels are *The Face That Must Die*, *Incarnate*, *Midnight Sun*, *The Count of Eleven*, *Silent Children*, *The Darkest Part of the Woods*, *The Overnight*, *Secret Story*, *The Grin of the Dark*, *Thieving Fear*, *Creatures of the Pool*, *The Seven Days of Cain*, *Ghosts Know*, *The Kind Folk*, *Think Yourself Lucky*, *Thirteen Days by Sunset Beach*, *The Wise Friend*, and *Somebody's Voice*. He recently brought out his Brichester Mythos trilogy, consisting of *The Searching Dead*, *Born to the Dark*, and *The Way of the Worm*.

The Village Killings and Other Novellas includes the new title story, and his other collections include *Waking*

Nightmares, *Alone with the Horrors*, *Ghosts and Grisly Things*, *Told by the Dead*, *Just Behind You*, *Holes for Faces*, *By the Light of My Skull*, and a two-volume retrospective roundup (*Phantasmagorical Stories*).

His essays and columns are collected in *Ramsey Campbell, Probably* and *Ramsey Campbell, Certainly*, while *Ramsey's Rambles* is a collection of video reviews, and *Limericks of the Alarming and Phantasmal* is a history of horror fiction in the form of fifty limericks.

Campbell's novels *The Nameless*, *Pact of the Fathers*, and *The Influence* have been filmed in Spain, and he is the president of the Society of Fantastic Films.

"This story was originally written for a macabre anthology based on the twelve days of Christmas," explains the author, "but this sadly didn't find a publisher. I'm glad my tale has found a new home."

"HAPPY CHRISTMAS, DAD."

"And a happy one to you, Harriet."

"Yes, dad, happy Christmas."

"Just as happy to you too, Catherine."

"A special one from me, Mike. Have the happiest you can."

"If you do I will, Margery. There'll be others, love."

"And dad, thanks for all the presents."

"Yes, big thanks, dad."

"You'll have opened them, then. Well, you should. Mine can wait. It'll be like a second Christmas."

"I haven't opened most of mine yet."

"Don't wait for me unless you want to, Margery. Has anybody built a snowman or is everyone too old?"

"Dad, we made some but we'd rather have you home."

"Yes, come and see them before they go sad."

"I expect I'll be home before that. I may be here for a few days

yet, though. They're forecasting more snow."

"They didn't forecast so much in the first place, did they? Maybe they'll be wrong again. Mike, what are you doing for dinner?"

"There's a festive feast at the Indian up the road. I'm treating myself."

"Oh, Mike, that isn't how Christmas ought to be for anyone."

"If I went traditional I'd only know it wouldn't be as good as yours. Save me some, that's all I ask."

Another round of Christmas wishes brought the conversation to an end. He pulled on the hiking boots he'd bought in Rambling Rose's in the village—he didn't know if the apostrophe was a bid for wit or a mistake—and doubled the bows of the laces before shoving himself off the bed with a creak of the elderly mattress. From the window of his old room he could see across the simplified white fields to the ridge that formed the horizon, where a solitary farmhouse sported a drooping cap of snow. Alongside this edge of the village, chunks of ice the colour of the unrelieved sky floated down a stream, over which the venerable stone arch that gave Leanbridge its name had been replaced by a bulkier structure of metal. As he clumped downstairs, his boots made the house sound hollowed out, emptied of more than furniture. It still held memories, and they had to be company enough for him.

Outside the house the snow engulfed his boots, sending a chill through him. Beyond the small garden the pavement was puffy with frozen slush. A few villagers laboured along the street of houses and small shops, calling festive salutations to one another, while a lone van matched their pace, spraying muddy snow over the kerb. Mike's walk to the Kerala Parlour took him past the churchyard, where a robin followed him the length of the wall, chirping variations on a theme. No doubt it was hoping to be fed.

He hadn't expected the restaurant to be so full. A waiter found him a table scarcely big enough for two and removed the other setting, which left Mike to face a corner of the room. A sitar on a

tape played half a dozen carols before the tunes came round again. The meal began with tandoori turkey drumsticks, followed by bhuna goose with roast Bombay potatoes and spicy sprouts, all of which struck Mike as cautiously conventional and yet almost a parody of the dinner Margery would have made at home. Along with the robin he'd seen, the other birds were starting to revive a memory until a woman's voice distracted him. "Aren't you speaking to us, young Michael?"

He only just recognised her and her husband. While the features of their faces were still as little as their statures were diminutive, the rest of them had spread outwards with age. "Mr Darlington," he said, turning his chair towards them. "Mrs Darlington. Merry Christmas to you both."

"Jack and Beryl," her husband said. "Aye, merry Christmas."

"And many of them," Beryl said. "I told Jack it must be you at Bill and Denise's, but he won't be told."

"Got it all clear, have you, Michael? We saw them loading up the wagon."

"Everything's gone that wasn't worth saving. I'll take some of that home."

"I expect you'll have your memories." Beryl dabbed at her eyes with a linen napkin. "I don't like to think of you all by yourself in there at Christmas," she said. "While you're stuck here you come to us for dinner."

"That's really kind of you. What can I bring?"

"Nothing but yourself," Jack said quite like an admonition. "You're all we're inviting."

Mike didn't know why he should find this ominous, and then he thought he did, though surely the old man couldn't have the same events in mind. "Do the birds still come round the village?" Mike said.

Beryl wiped her lips with the napkin as if she were erasing a response. "What are you asking?" Jack barely enquired.

"The Christmas birds. Do you still celebrate the four days that

way?"

"We never did."

Mike could have fancied that the old man's stare was trying to deny the memory, and then he saw his mistake. "I don't mean you. It was the Bundle family dressed up, wasn't it, all four of them."

Beryl unveiled her mouth to say "We've not seen them for years."

"The birds, do you mean, or the Bundles?"

"They went off," Beryl said, tapping her forehead with a finger.

"Right off," Jack said, "and not missed either."

Mike might have pursued the subject if he hadn't gathered that the Darlingtons weren't anxious to be reminded of the family who had lived beyond the bridge. Beryl was already standing up. "We'll see you for dinner tomorrow," she told him. "No need to stay in there on your own when it gets dark."

Jack was moving to follow her when he grabbed the back of the chair, squeezing his eyes so tight the lids grew pale. "Jack," Beryl cried.

"Don't make a scene, woman." His eyes wavered open, and he pushed the chair away. "Just a spell," he told Mike. "You get that sort of nuisance at my age."

Mike watched him make his careful way to the door, outside which he took Beryl's arm, whoever was supporting whom. Mike lingered over Christmas pudding and coffee, so that by the time he left the restaurant the streetlamps were gilding the slush. As he reached the churchyard the robin hopped along the wall, and its vague bloated shadow jerked across the graves, rearing up whenever it encountered a headstone. Not caring much for the sight, he tramped home as fast as he could.

An echo of his footsteps met him in the hall. He left his boots next to the Welcome mat, on which the first three letters had been scuffed almost out of existence, and peeled off his sodden socks on the way upstairs for a bath. The central heating felt as if it was only disguising a chill. While he lay in the bath he was aware of

the empty house around him, and felt as if he ought to listen for some noise he might prefer not to hear. When he began to shiver —the water had grown cold, it seemed all of a sudden—he opened the door, having climbed out of the bath.

He'd kept the television in the front room, along with a newish sofa and its associated pair of armchairs. He found a variety show on a nostalgic channel, but didn't care much for a comedian who whistled counterpoint to the melodies he was playing on a violin. Mike didn't need to think what the trilling resembled. He switched off the television and leafed through a photograph album, recalling Christmases in Leanbridge—his father and Uncle Bill taking him for walks while Aunt Denise and his mother filled the house with aromas of Christmas dinner, the toys he would never unwrap until he'd tried to guess what they were, the board games everyone would play past his usual bedtime. Soon he took his reminiscences up to bed.

He might have fallen asleep with them if he hadn't looked out of the window. The pale fields glimmered beneath the smouldering glow of the clouds, against which he was just able to glimpse the pallid hulk on the horizon. Now he remembered it was the Bundles' house. He'd often heard Mrs Bundle screeching at her husband and her sons, a sound that had grated in his ears even though it was shrivelled by distance. Unable to make out any words, he might almost have mistaken it for the furious cry of a bird.

He drew the musty curtains and climbed into the low bed. While it wasn't quite a double, it was wide enough to remind him that he was by himself. The empty section felt as though it had brought the desertion of the house into the room. It reminded him how he'd felt when he was small, and perhaps that was why he remembered the first time he'd seen the Christmas ritual.

That Christmas was the first he and his parents had spent in Leanbridge—after that, each couple had played host in alternate years until he reached his teens—and he'd been six years old.

After dinner he'd helped to wash up all the plates and cutlery, and was about to propose a Ludo tournament on the table they'd cleared when Aunt Denise replenished it with a solitary mince pie on a plate. "Who's that for?" Mike was eager to learn.

"Our first visitor."

"I don't think we know about that, do we?" Mike's father said.

"You must know your twelve days of Christmas," Uncle Bill told his brother, who began to respond just as bluffly until they all heard a chirping outside the house.

It must have been crossing the bridge. It sounded stridently determined and only intermittently melodious. As it approached it grew louder than Mike imagined any bird could sing. "Here he comes," Uncle Bill enthused, and his wife smiled so hard that it narrowed her eyes. The chirping resounded along the hall, and the caller rapped on the front door. "You let Bobby in, Michael," his aunt urged.

As Mike opened the front door he was hoping to see not just a partridge or somebody dressed as one but a pear tree as well, and at first he was merely confused. Silhouetted against the streetlamp outside the gate was a rotund man who had gone to some trouble to render himself rounder. Padding thrust a crimson waistcoat forward from his jacket, which was as black as his capacious trousers. His hands were clasped behind his back, and his head was lowered, giving Mike the grotesque notion that the man had used some part of it to knock on the door. The visitor raised his head to reveal an unexpectedly thin sharp face, which he contorted to force the scrawny lips upwards until the pointed nose looked yet more beak-like. The lips parted a fraction, and the mimicry of birdsong shrilled between them. "Have you told him to come in, Michael?" Uncle Bill called.

Mike did his best not to be daunted by the visitor, having deduced that the trills were made by a kind of device he'd seen street vendors demonstrating. "My uncle says come in," he said and backed along the hall.

The padded man bobbed after him, chirping as he came, and slammed the front door with a backwards kick. Uncle Bill and Aunt Denise were beyond the table, which they indicated with outstretched hands and identical welcoming smiles. They began to laugh and applaud as their visitor hopped ponderously about the room, chirping with such force that it left all tunefulness behind. When he ducked to the table and picked up the mince pie with his teeth before throwing his head back to bolt down his prize, they clapped harder than ever, glancing at Mike's parents to make them join in. The man stuck out a fat tongue to capture crumbs around his mouth, and then he hopped so weightily into the hall that Mike felt the floorboards quiver. "Let him out, Michael," his aunt said.

Presumably the man couldn't open the door while he was pretending his arms were folded wings. There was only just space for Mike to sidle past him. Having hastened to open the door, the boy watched the swollen figure chase its growing shadow away from the streetlamp, emitting its version of birdsong to announce its arrival at the next house. As the adults made for the front-room parlour, Mike's father said "What was all that in aid of?"

"That was Mr Bundle," Aunt Denise told Mike. "You can see their house from your window."

"Maybe he'd rather not," Mike's mother said.

"I'm asking what the Bundle character was supposed to be," his father said. "Funniest partridge I've ever seen."

"He was a robin," Uncle Bill said with an elder brother's laugh. "Don't you know the difference?"

"Tell me what a robin would be up to, prancing round like that."

"It's a tradition," Aunt Denise said, drawing the curtains to shut out the night. "They've done it every year since we moved here."

"Their family tradition," Uncle Bill said as if this should settle the matter.

“Makes no sense to me,” Mike’s father said. “It’s got nothing to do with the twelve days of Christmas.”

“They’re the calling birds,” Aunt Denise insisted. “He was the first one.”

Mike saw the objections were making his aunt and uncle impatient, or were they troubled in some other way? They should have been uneasy with the misinterpretation of the old rhyme, he thought as he lay in bed in the empty house. A calling bird was just a corruption of colly bird, the dialect name for a blackbird. At least he’d come to the end of the memory, and preferred not to go further while he was by himself in the dark. As he tried to grasp sleep he heard a robin chirping somewhere near the bridge. He’d begun to wonder if he’d ever heard a robin sing so late at night when sleep overtook him.

He wakened hoping that a thaw might let him risk the drive home, but more snow had fallen overnight. He was contenting himself with porridge for breakfast when Margery rang. “How was your Christmas dinner, Mike?”

“Safe Indian, I think we’d have to call it. Indian for folk who think it’s only curry and tandoori.”

“So long as you’re safe as well.”

He found he might have liked her not to say that. “Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Just don’t try to drive today. They say it’s likely to improve in a couple of days.”

It seemed childish to hope too passionately that the conditions would, and staying in the house felt like waiting to escape. Instead he went out for a walk. As he crossed the bridge he saw the stream was clear of ice apart from fragments disintegrating among the reeds along the banks. The winding road was plump with snow that squeaked beneath his boots. He was more than halfway to the Bundle farmhouse, not that he was heading for it, when a gate in the shrouded hedge on that side of the road let him see tracks in the field. They crossed the snow from the direction of the Bundle

house, if by no means directly—their pattern suggested that someone had been performing a dance so haphazard that Mike couldn't guess what tune they might have been hearing. Craning over the gate, he saw that the footprints led to the village. When he returned to the bridge he found he hadn't noticed that they passed through a splintered gap in the hedge onto the road.

He couldn't tell where they went then. His own footprints had obscured them, and beyond the bridge there were far too many tracks in the street to let him identify them. On the field the overnight snowfall had blurred them so much that he couldn't distinguish their shape. All the same, he felt compelled to try until he started shivering, and then he retreated to the house.

When the streetlamps flickered alight he remembered Beryl Darlington's invitation. Surely she hadn't meant him to join them as soon as night fell, and he watched a family adventure he'd seen with the girls years ago. It made him feel as if he was trying to recapture his own childhood, which wasn't entirely appealing just now. He stayed with the film so as not to bother the Darlingtons too soon, and then he made his way along the village street. It was impossible to judge whether the tracks from the field had progressed so far.

Beryl's dinner was the kind Boxing Day brought, cold ham and turkey, salads and such. While Margery's was more inventive, this one reminded him of his Christmases in Leanbridge, which might have been why he said "What can you tell me about the Bundles?"

His hosts gazed at him before Jack said "What are you wanting to know?"

Mike sensed they wouldn't welcome many questions. "Where did that tradition of theirs come from?"

"It was in the family," Jack said. "Their parents did it to them from what folk heard, and maybe theirs before them did."

"Whose parents, sorry?"

"Whoever's they were." In a tone that made it clear these were his last words on the subject Jack said "They were always a close

lot, the Bundles. Didn't want much to do with anybody else."

Mike thought he might have understood more than he relished. "Is that why they mixed up the rhyme, do you think? Because there was nobody to tell them they were wrong?"

"Someone did," Beryl said, "and wished they hadn't."

Although Mike saw she preferred to leave it there he said "What happened?"

"They danced round her house all Christmas and nobody wanted to be first to try and stop them. Everybody locked the door and hoped they'd go away."

"They said it was the rhyme that got the old ways wrong," Jack said. "They wouldn't go away till she believed them."

Mike wasn't sure if he would have asked how the Bundles had achieved this even if Beryl hadn't changed the subject. "When do you think you'll be able to go away, I mean go home?"

"I'm aiming for the day after tomorrow. I wouldn't have come here so late in the year except that's when they let us teachers loose."

Was it just his facetiousness that made his hosts frown? "Here's hoping for your wish," Jack said and raised his glass of port to urge it on its way.

"We'll pray for it if you like." With no relevance Mike could grasp, Beryl added "You know who the true love in the rhyme is meant to be, who gives out all the gifts? Folk say it's God."

As Mike trudged through the slush in the street he wondered if the Bundles would have said so. Somehow he didn't think they would. The robin had gone from the churchyard wall, and he was almost at the house when he heard a noise beyond it, a rapid chattering that sounded nearly liquid. The last remnants of ice must be cracking apart in the stream. There was no need to go and look, and he let himself into the house.

The empty hall and the deserted rooms seemed to amplify his memories, isolating him with them. He tried to recall the best elements of his Christmases in Leanbridge, but couldn't recapture

his sense of being safe in the midst of his family, since he no longer was. By the time he went to bed he was wondering when that sense had begun to falter, which brought back his first Boxing Day in the village.

They'd cleared the dining-table, and Mike was hoping this had made way for a board game until his aunt brought in a mince pie on a plate. "Expecting another visitor, are we?" his father said.

"The next three nights." Aunt Denise continued sounding apologetic but determined while she said "You'll let him in, won't you, Michael? He won't do you any harm."

Mike felt as if he was being used as some form of defence. "Who's he going to be?" he said, trying to feel eager.

"It's Burky Bundle, Michael."

Mike began to giggle at the name until he saw his aunt and uncle didn't want him to laugh too much. He could have fancied they were nervous on his behalf if not their own. Once he fell silent he found he was listening, as he realised they were. He thought his mother was about to speak when they heard a gobbling noise outside the house. "That's him," Aunt Denise said, following her husband to the far side of the table, where Mike could have thought they were taking refuge. The shrill fragmented practically liquid cry grew louder, to be interrupted by a peremptory rapping at the front door. "Do your duty, Michael," Uncle Bill said.

Mike hurried to be done with the task. When he pulled the door wide he was confronted by a figure as thin as last night's visitor had been rotund. The man wore a black overcoat and black trousers that clung to his skinny legs, and he'd tugged the reddish hair on the crown of his head up to form a crest. Apart from this and holding his arms behind his back, he seemed to have made no attempt to resemble a bird until he lifted his head, revealing the sharp Bundle face, and contorted his features more like a beak. His stringy throat worked, and the gobble shrilled out of his mouth. "You have to say come in, Michael," Uncle Bill called.

“Come in,” Mike mumbled and moved to the stairs until the newcomer shut the door and darted along the hall as rapidly as he was emitting his cry. Mike trailed after him into the front room, only to stumble back into the hall, because the visitor no longer had a head. He continued to emit the gobble as he dodged back and forth in front of the table, beyond which Mike’s aunt and uncle appeared to have decided that mirth was appropriate after all. They laughed harder when the man’s head sprouted from the upturned collar to seize the mince pie with its beaky lips, and then the head vanished so utterly that Mike wondered what the man was made of. It reappeared before the man had finished, and his attempt at a chattering call sprayed crumbs across the table, disconcerting Mike almost as much as the applause his aunt and uncle gave the performance. “Michael,” his uncle said.

Mike could have thought he was being accused of making the mess until he realised Uncle Bill was directing him to let out the visitor. He ran to open the front door, and shut it as soon as the gobbling man pranced onto the path. The adults were emerging into the hall, and his father said “Can’t get much worse than that, I shouldn’t think.”

Aunt Denise and Uncle Bill had stayed as silent as the empty house was now. As Mike tried to leave the memory behind he heard the high rapid intermittent sound near the bridge. He didn’t need to think what it resembled, let alone go to the window, and he dragged the quilt over his face.

When sunlight roused him from yet another uneasy doze he was relieved to see no more snow had fallen. Last time he’d looked out of the bedroom window he hadn’t noticed the tracks in the field beyond the bridge, but now he saw they’d multiplied. They looked more crazed than ever. As soon as he was dressed he made for the gap in the hedge across the stream.

Two wanderers had left footprints on the field, but he couldn’t tell whether they’d come into the village. Certainly whoever had been prancing in the snow had used the gap in the hedge before

returning towards the Bundle farm. Though vigour that looked manic had blurred the tracks, Mike couldn't shake off an impression that they had been made by bare feet. The feet could have passed for claws, the prints were so thin.

Phoning Margery from the house only left it feeling emptier. They hadn't much to say beyond hoping no more snow would fall, as the forecasts tentatively promised. Drivers were still warned not to travel. While Mike was impatient to discuss the footprints, they would have needed too much explanation. He kept the subject to himself until dinner with the Darlingtons was finished, and then he said "I think there's someone at the Bundle house."

Jack shut his eyes tight, and his voice sounded equally squeezed. "Who?"

Beryl reached a shaky hand to clasp his. "Don't get into a state, Jack."

"I want to hear what Michael has to say," Jack said, groping for her hand. "What do you think you've seen, Michael?"

"Just footprints over there. I wonder if any of the Bundles are back."

"Don't say that," Beryl said low but fiercely. "We told you once, they're long gone and good riddance."

"Is someone living in their house?" When the old man gave a negative grunt Mike said "Squatters, maybe?"

"God help any that there are," Beryl said. "They'll not last long."

Mike wasn't sure if she had opposition from the villagers in mind. He saw Jack's eyes tighten, and tried to improve the mood. "One thing I never knew," he said. "What were their real names?"

Jack's eyes wavered open, though not much. "Whose?"

"Bobby and Burky and the rest of them."

"Those were their names." With a stare like a warning Jack said "That's how deep they got into what they did."

"At least they managed to keep their farm going as well."

"As long as they did till they didn't," Beryl said. "Now can we

please talk about something else? It looks like you'll be going home tomorrow."

Jack nodded as vigorously as he appeared to feel able to risk, and Mike could have thought they were wishing him gone. He didn't stay with them much longer, though he knew which memory would be waiting in the empty house. As he tramped through the icy slush he remembered how the sight of another solitary mince pie on the table had made him hold his breath while he listened for someone approaching the house. His tension must have been apparent, because his father said "You don't have to let anybody in if you don't want to, Michael."

Mike sensed how tense their hosts were trying not to seem. "If aunt and uncle want me to," he declared with a six-year-old's valour, "I don't mind."

He did, but hoped it didn't show. He was almost glad when a noise outside the house distracted everyone from watching him—a harsh imperious honk. He would have liked to think that whoever was coming had made the noise with a horn. The shrill squawks grew aggressive as they reached the house, where they gave way to an urgent rapping on the front door. "It's Gussy Bundle, Michael," Uncle Bill said. "Let him in."

Mike hastened to throw the door wide, and managed not to flinch. "Come in," he said for everyone to hear.

At first he thought the gaunt man in black was cocking his head on one side just to resemble a bird. As the beaky face contorted itself to force out another squawk the head tilted further askew, and Mike thought he heard bones creak. The newcomer lunged into the house as if he were being led by his broken neck, and Mike flinched after all. If his family wouldn't have wondered where he'd gone, he might have remained in the hall.

He dodged around the table to stand between his parents as the visitor hopped from foot to foot, parading in front of the audience. Now and then the head reared up with a sharp honk, only to skew further on a neck that looked more dislocated still. Mike wished

the eyes didn't look so dead, but they were shrunken by the skin around them, which must be hiding the whites, leaving them black as a bird's. Bobby and Burky had eyes like that, he realised now. Aunt Beryl gave a small cry that she turned into a laugh as Gussy Bundle's head jerked erect with a shrill honk, then seized the mince pie in its protruding mouth. The head sagged onto his shoulder before he'd finished swallowing and honking, and he veered towards the hall like a hanged man swinging on a rope. Mike dodged around him to open the front door, but didn't want to look at even the back of the head wobbling sideways on the neck. "Well," he heard his father say, "I was wrong."

"How were you, dear?" Mike's mother said.

"That was even worse than last night's. Can't wait to see what comes tomorrow."

The thaw should, Mike hoped as he tried to sleep in the empty house, and he could drive home. When he heard a series of shrill honks in the night, he told himself he was hearing a car horn. The next sound that roused him from trying to drowse was the trilling of a bird—no, of his phone. "Don't even think of coming home today," Margery said.

Mike felt abandoned if not betrayed. "Why don't you want me to?"

"Of course we want you, but haven't you seen the reports? There was a freeze and there've been accidents all over the motorway. They're saying it ought to be clear tomorrow."

Mike glanced out of the window as if this might disprove the prospect of a freeze, and saw new footprints on the field across the stream. Their deranged confusion left him uncertain how many people had made them, but he could see the tracks led to and from the Bundle farm. "I'll find things to do, then," he said.

It took him most of half an hour to reach the farm. The gate from the road had collapsed, and rotten struts poked out of the snow. There were no footprints in the snow covering the drive that led to the house, and Mike could have thought that whoever had

crossed the field didn't know enough to use the road. The three sets of tracks leading from the side of the house that faced the village had certainly been left by bare feet as bony as claws, he saw as he made for a front window. The light from a sky the colour of dusk didn't extend far into the room, but he could see several decrepit armchairs that appeared to have been torn asunder, exposing wood that looked pecked by some implement. The stuffing from the chairs was strewn over the floorboards like the lining of a birdcage. A stench seeped through the grimy window, and as he recoiled Mike thought he heard a movement in the dimness—a sluggish fluttering. He wasn't slow in returning to the road.

He couldn't have kept all that to himself, especially when he would be alone in the house with it. Over dinner very much like a repetition of its predecessors he told the Darlingtons "I went to the Bundle farm."

Jack's left eyelid wavered as he stared at Mike. "Don't keep bringing them up, Michael," Beryl said.

"What did you want to go and do that for?" Jack said, pressing a fingertip against the lid to hold it still.

"I said there were tracks over there, remember. And have you been hearing anything at night?"

Jack's drooping eyelid twitched beneath the finger. "No," he declared.

"I think I have, and that's why I went to look."

Jack's mouth appeared to be growing as hard to control as the eyelid. "See anyone, did you?"

"Not quite."

"Thank God for that," Beryl said. "Now can we please stop talking about them for good?"

"I don't see how that will make them go away," Mike couldn't help observing.

"Maybe talking's brought them, and you'll be the one that did."

"I don't get that, I'm sorry. I thought you said they'd gone."

“We thought they had, the lot of them,” Jack struggled to pronounce. “The last of them’s been dead for years.”

Mike felt like a child who’d been tricked, perhaps by his own dullness. In a bid to find some reassurance that wouldn’t sound too skeptical or patronising he blurted, “Don’t you think it was just childish, the way they carried on?”

“Michael,” Beryl cried, “don’t say things like that about them in our house.”

He saw his hosts willing him not just to be quiet but to leave, and stood up. “Thanks for all your hospitality,” he stayed to say, “and please forget everything I said about, just forget them.”

He hoped this worked more for the Darlingtons than it did for him. As his boots sloshed through the slush he tried not to think of the fourth night of Christmas. The street was so deserted that he could have thought all the villagers were hiding in their houses. Even the Kerala Parlour was shut, and nobody was visible beyond the frosted windows of the pub. If discussing the Bundles could bring them back, was it even safe to remember? But the fear of remembering roused the memory as he stepped into the empty house.

He didn’t know who had been most nervous about the final visit. His sense that some if not all of the family were pretending not to be had made him anxious to convince them that he wasn’t. He watched his aunt leave the mince pie on the table, where the plate gave an inadvertent fragile clatter that suggested her hands weren’t quite steady. When all the adults took up their positions on the far side of the table Mike felt not much better than cast out, and wished that his parents would protest on his behalf so that he could undertake to brave the last visitor. He was finding it hard to breathe without attracting everyone’s concern by the time he heard a noise coming towards the house, a harsh caw as much like a crone’s voice as a bird’s. Before his breaths felt ready the cry was at the front door, along with an impatient rapping. “It’s Carrie Bundle, Michael,” his aunt said.

Mike hesitated, not least because she hadn't told him to answer the door, and then he hurried to fling it open. "You've got to come in," he said.

At first glance the woman outlined by the streetlamp looked less daunting than the rest of her family had. She was just a head taller than Mike but almost as broad as the doorway. A frayed dress dangled beneath the hem of her equally black coat, and a black beret was pulled low on her head. It was only when she raised it that Mike saw she'd blackened her sharp face. She clenched the features to drive out a caw that sounded close to a word, and hopped stumpy-legged into the hall.

Mike followed her to the dining-room and retreated around the table as she stumped rapidly back and forth. Her caws sounded more and more like "Give." At last she ducked to pick up the mince pie in her mouth. As she consumed it her head jerked from side to side, letting her beady gaze range over the audience. Her eyes were utterly black, as if the darkness of her face and costume was concentrated in them. She continued gazing as she licked her lips in search of crumbs, and Mike was suddenly afraid that she would emit her demanding cry again—that she wanted more of a prize. While he couldn't have put it into words at that age, her eyes were so dead that he might have thought he was looking at death. Even when she turned her back at last to hop ponderously into the hall, the slowness of the gesture seemed to threaten that she would return.

He'd overcome his childish dread, of course; at least, he thought he had. By his early teens—the last time he'd spent Christmas in Leanbridge—he'd found the Bundles' seasonal performance boring, embarrassing, stupid. He had certainly used all those words to himself. He might have liked to recapture his teenage cynicism, but for the moment he couldn't even recall the intervening visits. Just that first encounter seemed to have lodged in his head. When he climbed the stairs the empty house made his footsteps sound as small as they would have been then. He would

have liked to hear Margery, but could think of nothing to say that mightn't divulge his nervousness.

He was brushing his teeth when he thought he heard a sound harsher than the whir of the electric motor. He switched off the brush and held his breath—ceased to breathe, at any rate. In a moment he heard the noise again, a sharp caw outside the house. He might have succeeded in believing it was only a nightbird if it hadn't come so close to pronouncing a syllable. The frosted window of the bathroom showed him nothing. As he crossed his old bedroom, leaving the light off to help him see outside if not to avoid drawing attention to himself, he felt no less reluctant than he had when he'd been sent to open the front door of the house.

Four shapes were hopping or darting or floundering about the field beyond the stream. Against the muffled phosphorescence of the snow their outlines remained indistinct, but Mike had the impression they were somehow frayed. The figure that was blundering haphazardly about appeared to be behaving in that fashion for lack of a head. Though Mike would have preferred not to distinguish any more details, he pressed his face against the chill window, and at once all the figures turned towards him.

They sped in their various ways to the bank of the stream and lifted their heads to him. Even the decapitated shape did, or at least produced from its collar all that it had to show. The most bloated of the figures seemed to have lost some of its stuffing like a soft doll that had burst open, and Mike could see that its companions were disintegrating just as much. All their faces looked incomplete, not just because of the dimness, but he saw the glint of tiny shrunken eyes. They gave him a sense that the night had taken on a kind of life.

Mike was inching back from the window—he was hoping desperately that if he moved slowly enough, the watchers mightn't notice—when the figure closest to the bridge gave another raucous caw and darted to the gap in the hedge alongside the road. As the others hopped or lurched after her, Mike found he couldn't move.

The clumsiest of them had concealed its withered remnant of a head again, while its equally fleshless companion's head was lolling wildly on a splintered neck. Mike saw the four advance across the bridge, and then they were out of sight. He could still hear the word their leader was cawing. He was able to move again, but as he struggled to think where to hide he heard the visitors reach the house.

Between harsh cries of "Give" their leader rapped at the front door. Mike heard tapping mixed with relentless chirping on the left side of the house, while on the other side thin knocks were interspersed with honks that made the mouth emitting them sound ragged. The back door was suffering a succession of clumsy thumps, between which a gobbling sounded altogether too liquid, as if someone were trying to cry out underwater. The demanding caws grew louder and more insistent, and Mike could only wish he had the necessary prize. "I've got nothing for you," he blurted, he didn't know how loud. "Nothing for you here."

In a moment there was silence. He couldn't even hear his own breath until he made himself take one. He was afraid that the visitors were biding their time, waiting to catch him unawares. He didn't know how long he remained frozen before he risked venturing into his aunt's and uncle's bedroom, which was empty even of its bed. He sneaked across the room and peered through the window before craning over the sill. As far as he could see, the street was deserted, and it was silent as ice.

He surprised himself by how soundly he slept. He felt as if his head had emptied out his memories. His phone wakened him. "Are you starting out soon?" Margery said. "They've cleared the roads."

As he used the bathroom he felt as if he was putting on all the speed he could before the world changed its mind about letting him go home. He ought to let the Darlingtons know he was leaving, though he mustn't tell them about last night's visitors. He scraped his windscreen and the other windows clear of frozen snow and drove along the village street. He hadn't reached the

Darlington house when he saw two paramedics returning to an ambulance outside. Beryl was in the doorway of the house, gripping both sides of the doorframe, and turned her lonely gaze on him. He had to go to her, though he was afraid to hear what she would say. He was climbing out of the car when she said just loud enough for him to hear "You brought them and they took him."

Mike found he had no words. He mimed dismay and regret close to a wordless apology, and took refuge in the car. He had to drive the other way out of the village, and as he swung the car around in the slush Beryl kept her bereft gaze on him. As he drove across the bridge he saw the Bundle house ahead. It had meant nothing to him when he'd driven to the village, and he did his best to think it meant nothing now. He didn't even glance at it while he drove past, and it betrayed no activity until it was behind him. He was watching it shrink in the mirror when he heard a muffled caw from inside the house. It could have been a word, but not the one he would have expected, which was why he drove faster to outrun whatever it might imply. "Next," it said.

THE GYPSIES IN THE WOOD

KIM NEWMAN

Kim Newman is a movie critic, author, and broadcaster. He is a contributing editor to *Sight & Sound* and *Empire* magazines, and his books about film include *Nightmare Movies*, *Millennium Movies*, *Kim Newman's Video Dungeon*, and BFI Classics studies of *Cat People*, *Doctor Who*, and *Quatermass and the Pit*.

Newman's fiction includes the best-selling Anno Dracula series, *Life's Lottery*, *Professor Moriarty: The Hound of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Secrets of Drearcliff Grange School*, *Angels of Music*, and *Something More Than Night* (in which Raymond Chandler and Boris Karloff team up in 1940s Hollywood), along with the comic *Anno Dracula: Seven Days in Mayhem*. As "Jack Yeovil," he wrote the *Vampire Genevieve* and *Dark Future* novels for Games Workshop.

He has also written for television (*Mark Kermode's Secrets of Cinema*), radio (*Afternoon Theatre: Cry-Babies*), and the theater (*The Hallowe'en Sessions*), and directed a tiny film (*Missing Girl*).

"'The Gypsies in the Wood' was written for a Science Fiction Book Club collection of novellas, *The Fair Folk*, edited by Marvin Kaye," reveals the author. "The brief was to write about fairies . . . and my first inclination was

to decline to contribute, since my instinctive reaction is that fairies are weedy, soppy, twee, and sick-making. Plus I'd already written a changeling story ('Angel Down, Sussex').

"Still, I'd been mulling over ideas that would develop my longstanding Victorian-era characters Charles Beauregard and Kate Reed, and their version of Arthur Conan Doyle's the Diogenes Club. I also started thinking about the earthy, rooty, bosky rural roots of what we now label 'folk horror,' and the commodification, commercialization, and exploitation of fairy tales—definitely a Victorian phenomenon, but one Disneyfied and fantasy-trilogied and whimsically packaged ever since.

"I was born in London, but brought up in the country in the 1970s—and so things like *The Stone Tape*, 'The Exorcism' (*Dead of Night*), 'Baby' (*Beasts*), *Straw Dogs*, and *Blood on Satan's Claw* resonate with me. My other ventures into folk horror might include *An English Ghost Story* and the Witchfinder comic I wrote with Maura McHugh, *The Mysteries of Unland*."

ACT I: THE CHILDREN OF EYE

1. "WE TAKE AN INTEREST"

"MR. CHARLES BEAUREGARD?" asked Dr. Rud, squinting through pince-nez.

Charles allowed he was who his carte de visite said he was.

"Of . . . the Diogenes Club?"

"Indeed."

He stood at the front door. The Criftins, the doctor's house, was

large but lopsided, several buildings close together, cobbled into one by additions in different stone. At once household, clinic, and dispensary, it was an important place in the parish of Eye, if not a noteworthy landmark in the county of Herefordshire. On the map Charles had studied on the down train, Eye was a double-yolked egg: two communities, Ashton Eye and Moreton Eye, separated by a rise of trees called Hill Wood and an open space of common ground called Fair Field.

It was midevening, full dark and freezing. His breath frosted. Snow had settled thick in recent weeks. Under a quarter moon, the countryside was dingy white, with black scabs where the fall was melted or cleared away.

Charles leaned forward a little, slipping his face into light spill to give the doctor a good, reassuring look at him.

Rud, unused to answering his own front door, was grumpily pitching in during the crisis. After another token glance at Charles's card, the doctor threw up his hands and stood aside.

A Royal Welsh Fusilier lounged in the hallway, giving cheek to a tweeny. The maid, who carried a heavy basin, tolerated none of his malarkey. She barged past the guard, opening the parlor door with a practiced hip shove, and slipped inside with an equally practiced flounce, agitating the bustle-like bow of her apron ties.

Charles stepped over the threshold.

The guard clattered upright, rifle to shoulder. Stomach in, shoulders out, eyes front, chin up. The tweeny, returning from the parlor, smirked at his tin-soldier pose. The lad blushed violet. Realizing Charles wore no uniform, he relaxed into an attitude of merely casual vigilance.

"I assume you are another wave of this *invasion*?" stated the doctor.

"Someone called out the army," said Charles. "Through channels, the army called out us. Which means you get me, I'm afraid."

Rud was stout and bald, hair pomaded into a laurel-curl fringe.

Five cultivated strands plastered across his pate, a sixth hanging awry—like a bellpull attached to his brain. Tonight, the doctor received visitors without ceremony, collarless, in shirtsleeves and waistcoat. He ought to be accustomed to intrusions at all hours. A country practice never closed. Charles gathered the last few days had been more than ordinarily trying.

"I did not expect a curfew, sir. We're good, honest Englishmen in Eye. And Welshmen too. Not some rebellious settlement in the Hindu Kush. Not an enemy position, to be taken, occupied, and looted!"

The guard's blush was still vivid. The tweeny put her hands on her broad hips and laughed.

"Your 'natives' seem to put up a sterling defense."

"Major Chilcot has set up inspection points, prohibited entry to Hill Wood, closed the Small Man . . ."

"I imagine it's for your protection. Though I'll see what I can do. If anything is liable to lead to mutiny, it's shutting the pub."

"You are correct in that assumption, sir. Correct."

Charles assessed Rud as quick to bristle. He was used to being listened to. Hereabouts, he was a force with which to be reckoned. Troubles, medical and otherwise, were brought to him. If Eye was a fiefdom, the Criftins was its castle and Dr. Rud—not the vicar, justice of the peace, or other local worthy—its lord. The doctor didn't care to be outranked by outsiders. It was painful for him to admit that some troubles fell beyond his experience.

It would be too easy to take against the man. Charles would never entirely trust a doctor.

The bite mark in his forearm twinged.

Pamela came to mind. His wife. His *late* wife.

She would have cautioned him against unthinking prejudice. He conceded that Rud could hardly be expected to cope. His usual run was births and deaths, boils and fevers, writing prescriptions and filling in certificates.

None of that would help now.

This sort of affair rang bells in distant places. Disturbed the web of the great spider. Prompted the deployment of someone like Mr. Charles Beauregard.

A longcase clock ticked off each second. The steady passage of time was a given, like drips of subterranean water forming a stalactite. Time was perhaps subjectively slower here than in the bustle of London—but as inevitable, unvarying, inexorable.

This business made the clock a liar. Rud did not care to think that. If time could play tricks, what *could* one trust?

The doctor escorted Charles along the hallway. Gaslights burned in glass roses, whistling slightly. Bowls of dried petals provided sweet scent to cover medical odors.

At the parlor door, the soldier renewed his effort to simulate attention. Rud showed the man Charles's card. The fusilier saluted.

"Not strictly necessary," said Charles.

"Better safe than sorry, sah!"

Rud tapped the card, turning so that he barred the door, looking up at Charles with frayed determination.

"By the by, how precisely does membership of this institution, this *club*—with which I am unfamiliar—give you the right to interview my patient?"

"We take an interest. In matters like these."

Rud, who had probably thought his capacity for astonishment exhausted, at once caught the implication.

"Surely this case is singular? Unique?"

Charles said nothing to contradict him.

"This has happened before? How often?"

"I'm afraid I really can't say."

Rud was fully aghast. "Seldom? Once in a blue moon? Every second Thursday?"

"I really can't say."

The doctor threw up his hands. "Fine," he said, "quiz the poor lad. I've no explanation for him. Maybe you'll be able to shed light. It'll be a relief to pass on the case to someone in authority."

"Strictly, the Diogenes Club has status rather than authority."

This was too much for Rud to take aboard. Even the mandarins of the Ruling Cabal could not satisfactorily define the standing of the Diogenes Club. Outwardly, the premises in Pall Mall housed elderly, crotchety misanthropes dedicated only to being left in peace. There were, however, other layers: sections of the club busied behind locked steel doors, *taking an interest*. Gentlemanly agreements struck in Whitehall invested the Diogenes Club as an unostentatious instrument of Her Majesty's government. More often than the public knew, matters arose beyond the purview of the police, the diplomatic service, or the armed forces. Matters few institutions could afford to acknowledge even as possibilities. *Some*body had to take responsibility, even if only a job lot of semiofficial amateurs.

"Come in, come in," said Rud, opening the parlor door. "Mrs. Zeals has been feeding the patient broth."

The Criftins was low ceilinged, with heavy beams. Charles doffed his hat to pass under the lintel.

From this moment, the business was *his* responsibility.

2. "MY MOTHER SAID I NEVER SHOULD"

THE PARLOR HAD fallen into gloom. Dr. Rud turned the gas key, bringing up light as if the play were about to begin. *Act 1, Scene 1: The parlor of the Criftins. Huddled in an armchair by the fire is . . .*

"Davey Harvill?"

The patient squirmed at the sound of Charles's voice, pulling up and hugging his knees, hiding his lower face. Charles put his hat on an occasional table and took off his heavy ulster, folding it over a high-backed chair.

The patient's eyes skittered, huge pupiled.

"This gentleman is . . ."

Charles waved his fingers, shutting off the doctor's preamble.

He did not want to present an alarming, mysterious figure.

The patient's trousers stretched tight around thin shanks, ripped in many places, cuffs high on the calf like knee breeches. He was shirtless and shoeless, a muffler wrapped around bird-thin shoulders. His callused feet rested in a basin of dirtied water. His toenails were like thorns. Many old sores and scars made scarlet lakes and rivers on the map of his very white skin. His thatch of hair was starched with clay into the semblance of an oversized magistrate's wig; his beard matted into pelt-like chest hair, threaded through with twigs; his mustache hung in twisted braids, strung with bead-like pebbles.

Glimpsing himself in a glass, Rud smoothed his own stray hair strand across his scalp.

Charles pulled a footstool close to the basin.

The patient looked like Robinson Crusoe after years on the island. Except Crusoe would have been tanned. This fellow's pallor suggested a prisoner freed from an oubliette. Wherever he had been marooned was away from the sun, under the earth.

An animal smell was about him.

Charles sat on the stool and took the patient's thin hands, lifting them from his knees. His fingernails were long and jagged.

"My name is Charles. May I talk with you?"

The eyes fixed on him, sharp and bright. A tiny flesh-bulb, like a drop of fresh blood, clung to the corner of the right eyelid.

"Talk, mister?"

The voice was thin and high. He spoke as if English were unfamiliar, and his native tongue lacked important consonants.

"Yes, just talk."

"Frightened, mister. Been so long."

The face was seamed. Charles would have estimated the patient's age at around his own, thirty-five.

Last week, Davey Harvill had celebrated his ninth birthday.

The patient had a child's eyes, frightened but innocent. He closed them, shutting out the world, and shrank into the chair. His

nails pressed into the meat of Charles's hands.

Charles let go and stood.

The patient—Davey, he had to be called—wound a corner of the muffler in his fingers, screwing it up close to his mouth. Tears followed runnels in his cheeks.

Mrs. Zeals tried to comfort him, with coos and more broth.

"Rest," said Charles. "You're safe now. Talking can wait."

Red crescents were pressed into the heels of Charles's hands, already fading. Davey was not weak.

The patient's eyes flicked open, glittering in firelight. There was a cunning in them, now. Childlike, but dangerous.

Davey gripped Charles's arm, making him wince.

"My mother said, I never should . . . play with *the gypsies in the wood* . . . if I did, she would say '*naughty girl to disobey*!'"

Davey let him go.

The rhyme came in a lower voice, more assured, almost mocking. Not a grown-up voice, though. A feathery chill brushed Charles's spine. It was not a boy's rhyme, but something a girl would sing. Davey smiled a secret smile, then swallowed it. He was as he had been, frightened rather than frightening.

Charles patted his shoulder.

"Has he an appetite?" he asked the housekeeper.

"Yes, sir."

"Keep feeding him."

Mrs. Zeals nodded. She was part-nurse, probably midwife too. The sort of woman never missed until she was needed, but who then meant life or death. If a Mrs. Zeals had been in the Hill Country, Charles might still be a husband and father. She radiated good sense, though this case tested the limitations of good sense as a strategy for coping.

"We shall talk again later, Davey. When you're rested."

Davey nodded, as much to himself as Charles.

"Dr. Rud, do you have a study? I should like to review the facts."

The doctor had hung back by the door, well out of reach.

"You're in charge, Mrs. Zeals," he said, stepping backward out of the room, eyes on the patient. "Mr. Beauregard and I have matters of import to discuss. Have Jane bring up tea, a light supper, and a bottle of port."

"Yes, doctor."

Rud shot a look at the soldier. He disapproved of the invasion, but at present felt safer with an armed guard in his home.

"It's this way," he told Charles, indicating with his hands, still watching the patient. "Up the back stairs."

Charles bowed to Mrs. Zeals, smiled again at Davey, and followed the doctor.

"Extraordinary thing, wouldn't you say?" Rud gabbled.

"Certainly," Charles agreed.

"Of course, he can't be who he says he is. There's some *trick* to this."

3. "PEBBLE IN POND"

RUD'S CONSULTING ROOM was on two levels, a step running across the floor raising a section like a small stage. One wall was lined with document boxes. Locked cabinets held phials of salves, balms, cures, and patent potions. A collection of bird and small mammal skeletons, mounted under glass domes, were posed upon items—rocks, branches, green cloth representing grass—suggestive of natural habitat.

On the raised area was a desk of many drawers and recesses. Above this, a studio photograph of Dr. and Mrs. Oliver Rud was flanked by framed documents, the doctor's diploma, and his wife's death certificate. Glancing at this last item, careful not to be seen to do so, Charles noted cause of death was down as *diphth.* and the signature was of another physician. He wondered if it was

prominently displayed to caution the doctor against medical hubris, or to forewarn patients that miracles were not always possible.

Where was Pamela's death certificate? India?

Rud sat by the desk, indicating for Charles an adjustable chair in the lower portion of the room, obviously intended for patients. Charles sat down, suppressing a thought that straps could suddenly be fixed over his wrists, binding him at a mad surgeon's mercy. Such things, unfortunately, were within his experience. The doctor rolled up the desk cover and opened a folder containing scrawled notes.

"Hieroglyphs," he said, showing the sheaf. "But I understand them."

A maid came in with the fare Rud had ordered. Charles took tea, while the doctor poured himself a full measure of port. A plate of precisely cut sandwiches went untouched.

"If you'll start at the beginning."

"I've been through this with Major Chilcot, and . . ."

Charles raised a finger.

"I know it's tiresome to rehash over and over, but this is a tale you'll retell for some years, no matter how it comes out. It'll be valuable to have its raw, original form before the facts become, as it were, *encrusted* with anecdotal frills."

Rud, vaguely offended, was realist enough to see the point.

"The yarns in circulation at the Small Man are already wild, Mr. Beauregard. By the end of the month, it'll be full-blown myth. And heaven knows what the newspapers will make of it."

"We can take care of that."

"Can you, indeed? What useful connections to have . . . at any rate, the facts? Where to begin?"

"Tell me about Davey Harvill."

Rud adjusted his pince-nez and delved into the folder.

"An ordinary little boy. The usual childhood ailments and scrapes, none fatal. Father was well set up for a man of his stripe.

Cabinetmaker. Skilled craftsman. Made most of the furniture in this room."

"*Was* well set up? Past tense."

"Yes, cut his arm open with a chisel and bled out before anything could be done. Two years ago. Undoubtedly an accident. Risk of the trade, I understand. By the time I was summoned, it was too late. Davey and his sisters, Sairey and Maeve, were raised by their mother, Mrs. Harvill. Admirable woman. Her children will have every chance in life. Would have had, rather. Now, it's anyone's guess. Sairey, the eldest child, is married to the local baker, Philip Riddle. She's expecting her first this spring. Maeve . . . well, Maeve's an unknown quantity. She is—was—two years older than her brother. A quiet, queer little girl. The sort who'd rather play by herself. Davey, or whoever this vagrant might be, says Maeve is still 'in the wood.'"

Charles sipped strong tea.

"Tell me about Davey's birthday."

"Last Wednesday. I saw him early in the morning. I was leaving Mrs. Loll. She's our local hypochondriac. Always dying, secretly fit as a horse. As I stepped out of her cottage, Davey came by, wrapped up warm, whipping a hoop. A new toy, a birthday present. Maeve trailed along behind him. 'If I don't watch him, doctor, he'll get run over by a cart,' she said. They were walking to school, in Moreton."

"Along Dark Lane?"

Rud was surprised. "You know the area?"

"I looked at the map."

"Ah, *maps*," said Rud, touching his nose. "Dark Lane is the road to Moreton *on the map*. But there's a cart track through Hill Wood, runs up to Fair Field. From there, you can hop over a stile and be in Moreton. Not everything is on the map."

"That's an astute observation."

"Davey was rolling his hoop. There was fresh-fallen snow, but the ruts in Fair Field Track were already cut. I saw him go into the

wood, his sister following, and that was it. I had other calls to make. Not something you think about, is it? Every time someone steps out of your sight, it could be the last you see of them?"

"Were you the last person to see the children?"

"No. Riddle, Sairey's husband, was coming down the track the other way, with the morning's fresh bake. He told them he had a present to give Davey later, when it was wrapped—but gave both children buns, warm from the ovens. Then, off they went. Riddle hasn't sold a bun since. In case they're cursed, if you can credit it. As we now know, Davey and Maeve didn't turn up for school."

"Why weren't they missed?"

"They were. Mrs. Grenton, the teacher, assumed the Harvills were playing truant. Giving themselves a birthday treat. Sledding on Fair Field or building a snowman. She told the class that when the miscreants presented themselves, a strapping would be their reward. Feels dreadful about it, poor woman. Blames herself. The Harvills had perfect attendance records. Weren't the truant sort. Mrs. Grenton wants me to prescribe something to make her headaches go away. Like a pebble in a pond, isn't it? The ripples. So many people wet from one splash."

Rud gulped port and refilled the measure. His hand didn't shake, but he gripped the glass stem as if steadying his fingers.

He whistled, tunelessly. Davey's rhyme.

"*Are* there gypsies in the wood?" asked Charles.

"What? Gypsies? Oh, the rhyme. No. We only see Romanies here at Harvest Festival, when there's a fair on Fair Field. The rhyme is something Maeve sings . . . used to sing. One of those girl's things, a skipping song. In point of fact, I remember her mother asking her not to chant it during the fair, so as not to offend actual gypsies. I doubt the girl took any notice. The gypsies, neither, come to that. No idea where the song comes from. I doubt if Violet Harvill ever had to warn her children against playing with strangers. This isn't that sort of country."

"I've an idea the gypsies in the rhyme aren't exactly gypsies.

The word's there in place of something else. Everywhere has its stories. A ghost, a dragon, a witch's ring . . ."

Rud thought a moment.

"The local bogey tale is *dwarves*. Kidnapping children to work in mines over the border. Black-faced dwarves, with teeth filed to sharp points. 'Say your prayers, boyo, or the Tiny Taffs will away with you, into the deep dark earth to dig for dirty black coal.' I've heard that all my life. As you say, everywhere has its stories. Over Leintwardine way, there's a Headless Highwayman."

"All Eye lives in fear of Welsh dwarves?"

"No, even children don't—didn't—pay any attention. It came up again, of course. When Davey and Maeve went missing. There was a stupid scrap at the Small Man. It's why the major closed the pub. English against Welsh. That's the fault line that runs through the marches. Good humored mostly, but sharp edged. We're border country, Mr. Beauregard. No one is wholly one thing or the other. Everyone has a grandparent in the other camp. But it's fierce. Come Sunday, you might hear 'love thy neighbor' from the pulpit, but we've three churches within spitting distance, each packed with folk certain the other congregations are marching in step to Hell. The Harvills call themselves English, which is why the children go to school in Moreton. The Ashton school is 'Welsh,' somehow. The schoolmaster is Welsh, definitely."

Charles nodded.

"Of course, all Eye agrees on something now. Welsh soldiers with English officers have shut down the pub. I'm afraid the uniting factor is an assessment of the character and ancestry of Major Chilcot."

Charles considered this intelligence. He had played the Great Game among the squabbling tribes of India and Afghanistan, representing the Queen in a struggle with her Russian cousin to which neither monarch was entirely privy, exploiting and being exploited by local factions who had their own Byzantine causes and conflicts. It was strange to find a Khyber Pass in

Herefordshire, a potential flash point for an uprising. In border countries the world over, random mischief could escalate near-forgotten enmities into riot and worse.

"When were the children missed in Ashton?"

"About five o'clock. When they didn't come in for their supper. Because it was the lad's birthday, Riddle had baked a special cake. Davey's friends came to call. Alfie Zeals, my housekeeper's son, was there. Even if brother and sister *had* played truant, they'd have been sure to be home. Presents were involved. The company waited hours. Candles burned down on the cake. Mrs. Harvill, understandably, got into a state. Riddle recounted his story of meeting the children on Fair Field Track. Alfie also goes to Moreton School and admitted Davey and Maeve hadn't been there all day. Mrs. Harvill rounded on the boy, who'd kept mum to keep his friend out of trouble. There were harsh words, tears. By then, it was dark. A party of men with lanterns formed. They came to me, in case a doctor was needed. You can imagine what everyone thought."

Charles could.

"Hill Wood isn't trackless wilderness. It's a patch between fields. You can get through it in five minutes at a stroll. Even if you get off Fair Field Track and have to wade through snow. The children couldn't be *lost* there, but mishaps might have befallen. A twisted ankle or a snapped leg, and the other too afraid to leave his or her sibling. The search party went back and forth. As the night wore on, we ventured further, to Fair Field and beyond. We should have waited till morning, when we could see tracks in the snow. By sunup, the wood was so dotted with boot prints that any made by the children weren't noticeable. You have to understand, we thought we'd find them at any moment. A night outside in March can be fatal for a child. Or anyone. We run to bone-freezing cold here. Frost forms on your face. Snow gets hard, like a layer of ice. Violet Harvill had to be seen to. Hysteria in a woman of her age can be serious. Some of our party had come directly from the

Small Man and were not in the best state. Hamer Dando fell down and tore a tendon, which should put a crimp in his poaching for months. Came the dawn, we were no better off."

"You summoned the police?"

"We got Throttle out of bed. He's been constable in Eye since Crimea. He lent his whistle to the search. The next day, he was too puffed to continue, so I sent for Sergeant High, from Leominster. He bicycled over, but said children run off all the time, dreaming of the South Seas, and traipse back days later, crying for mama and home cooking. I don't doubt he's right, usually. But High's reassurances sat ill with these circumstances. No boy runs away to sea when he has a birthday party to go to. Then, Davey's new whip was found in the wood, stuck into a snowbank."

"A development?"

"An unhappily suggestive one. The mother began insisting something be done, and I was inclined to support her. But what more *could* be done? We went over the ground again, stone-cold sober and in broad daylight. My hands are still frozen from dismantling snowdrifts. Every hollow, every dead tree, every path. We looked. Riddle urged we call out the army. Stories went around that the children had been abducted by foreign agents. More foreign than just Welsh. I had to prescribe laudanum for Violet."

"This was all five days ago?"

Rud checked his notes. "Yes. The weekend, as you can appreciate, was a terrible time. Riddle got his way. Major Chilcot's fusiliers came over from Powys. At first, they just searched again, everywhere we'd looked before. Violet was besieged by neighbors offering to help but with no idea what to do. I doubt a single soul within five miles has had a night's uninterrupted sleep since this began."

Rud's eyes were red rimmed.

"Then, yesterday morning," said the doctor, "Davey—or whoever he might be—came to his mother's door, and asked for

his blessed cake."

Rud slapped his folder on his desk. An end to his story.

"Your patient claims to be Davey Harvill?"

"Gets upset when anyone says he can't be."

"There is evidence."

"Oh yes. Evidence. He's wearing Davey's trousers. If the army hadn't been here, he'd have been hanged for that. No ceremony, just hanged. We're a long way from the assizes."

Charles finished his tea and set down the cup and saucer.

"There's more than that," he said. "Or I wouldn't be here. Out with it, man. Don't be afraid of being laughed at."

"It's hard to credit . . ."

"I make a specialty of credulousness. Open-minded, we call it."

Gingerly, Rud opened the file again.

"The man downstairs. I would put his age at between thirty-five and forty. Davey is nine years old. Ergo, they are not the same person. But, in addition to his own scars, the patient has *Davey's*. A long, jagged mark on his calf. Done hauling over a stile, catching on a rusty nail. I treated the injury last year. The fellow has a perfect match. Davey has a growth under the right eye, like a teardrop. That's there, too."

"These couldn't be new made?"

"The scar, just maybe—though it'd have to be prepared months in advance. The teardrop is a birthmark. Impossible to contrive. It's not a family trait, so this isn't some long-lost Harvill popping up at the worst possible moment."

Upon this development, Chilcot, like all bewildered field commanders, communicated with his superiors, who cast around for somebody with special responsibility for changelings.

Which would be the Diogenes Club.

"Where does he claim to have been?"

"Just 'in the wood.'"

"With the gypsies?"

"He sings that rhyme when the mood takes him, usually to end

a conversation he's discomfited by. As you said, I don't think gypsies really come into it."

"You've examined him. How's his general health?"

Rud picked up a note written in shiny new ink. "What you'd expect from a tramp. Old wounds, untended but healed. Various infestations—nits, lice, the like. And malnutrition."

"No frostbite?"

Rud shook his head.

"So he's not been sleeping out of doors this past week? In the cold, cold snow?"

Rud was puzzled again. "Maybe he found a barn."

"Maybe."

"There's another . . . ah, anomaly," ventured the doctor. "I've not told anyone, because it makes no sense. The fellow has good teeth. But he has two missing at the front, and new enamel growing through the gums. Normal for a nine-year-old, losing milk teeth and budding adult choppers. But there is no third dentition. That's beyond freakish."

Rud slipped the paper back into the folder.

"That's Davey Harvill's file, isn't it?" "Yes, of course . . . oh, I see. The patient should have a fresh folder. He is not Davey Harvill."

Rud pulled open desk drawers, searching for a folder.

"Follow your first instincts, Dr. Rud. You added notes on this patient to Davey's folder. It seemed so natural that you didn't even consider any other course. Logic dictated you proceed on an assumption you know to be impossible. So, we have reached the limits of logic."

4. "SILAS GOBBO"

IN THE SNUG of the Small Man, after breakfast, Charles read the riot

act to the army. Though the reason for closing the pub was plain, it did not help Major Chilcot's case that he had billeted himself on the premises and was prone to 'requisitioning' from the cellar.

"Purely medicinal," Chilcot claimed. "After a spell wandering around with icicles for fingers, a tot is a damn necessity."

Charles saw his point, but suspected it had been sharpened after a hasty gulp.

"That's reasonable, Major. But it would be politic to pay your way."

"We're here to *help* these ungrateful bounders . . ."

The landlord glared from behind the bar.

"Just so," said Charles.

The major muttered but backed down.

The landlord, visibly perked, came over.

"Will the gentleman be requiring more tea?"

"No, thank you," said Charles. "Prepare a bill for myself and the major. Keep a running tally. You have my word you will not be out of pocket. Tonight, you may reopen."

The landlord beamed.

"Between sunset and ten o'clock," insisted Chilcot.

A line appeared in the landlord's forehead.

"That's fair," said Charles.

The landlord accepted the ruling. For the moment.

The major was another local bigwig, late in an undistinguished career. This would be the making or breaking of a younger, more ambitious officer.

While he stayed cozy in the Small Man, his men bivouacked on Fair Field under retreat-from-Moscow conditions. They were diamond quality. Sergeant Beale, an old India hand, had rattled off a precise report of all measures taken. It wasn't through blundering on the part of the fusiliers that Maeve Harvill still hadn't turned up.

Charles left the pub and walked through Ashton Eye. Snow lay thick on roofs and in front gardens. Roads and paths were cleared,

chunky drifts stained with orange mud piled at the sides. By day, the occupation was more evident. Soldiers, stamping against the cold, manned a trestle at the bottom of Fair Field Track. Chilcot, probably at Beale's prompt, had established a perimeter around Hill Wood.

At the Criftins, Charles was admitted—by a manservant, this time. He joined a small company in the hallway. A fresh fusilier stood guard at the parlor. Dr. Rud introduced Charles, vaguely as 'from London,' to a young couple, the woman noticeably with child, and a lady of middle years, obviously in distress.

"Philip and Sairey Riddle, and Mrs. Harvill . . . Violet."

He said his good mornings and shook hands.

"We've asked you here to put the man purporting to be Davey to the test," Charles explained. "Some things are shared only among family members. Not great confidences, but trivial matters. Intelligence no one outside a home could be expected to have. Remarks made by someone to someone else when they were alone together. An impostor won't know that, no matter how carefully he prepared the fraud."

Mrs. Harvill sniffled into a kerchief. Her daughter held her shoulders.

"He is still in the parlor?" Charles asked Rud.

"Spent the night there. I've gotten him into a dressing gown. He's had breakfast. I had my man shave him, and make a start on his hair."

The doctor put his hand to the door.

"It is best if we hold back," said Charles. "Allow the family to meet without outsiders present."

Rud frowned.

"We'll be here, a moment away, if needs arise."

The doctor acquiesced and held the door open.

"Mam," piped a voice from inside. Charles saw Davey, in his chair, forearms and shins protruding from a dressing gown a size too small for him. Without the beard, he looked younger.

Mrs. Harvill froze and pulled back, shifting out of Davey's eyeline.

"Mam?" Almost a whine, close to tears.

Mrs. Harvill was white, hand tightly gripping her daughter's, eyes screwed shut. Her terror reminded Charles of Davey's, last night, when he felt threatened. Sairey hugged her mother, but detached herself.

"You stay here, Mam. Me and Phil'll talk with the lad. The gentlemen will look after you."

Sairey passed her mother on to Rud.

Mrs. Harvill embraced the practitioner, discomfiting him, pressing her face to his shoulder. She sobbed, silently.

Sairey, slow and graceful in her enlarged state, took her husband's arm and stepped into the parlor. Davey started out of his seat, a broad smile showing his impossible teeth buds.

"Sairey, Phil . . ."

Charles closed the door.

Rud sat Mrs. Harvill on a chair and went upstairs to fetch a something to calm her. The woman composed herself. She looked at Charles, paying him attention for the first time.

"Who are you?" she asked, bluntly.

"Charles Beauregard."

"Oliver said that. I mean what are you?"

"I'm here to help."

"Where are my children? Are they safe?"

"That's what we are trying to determine, Mrs. Harvill."

The answer didn't satisfy. She looked away, ignoring him. In her pettishness, she was like Davey. Charles even thought he heard her crooning, "My mother said . . ." under her breath. She had found a fetish object, a length of rope with a handle. She bound her hand until the fingers were bloodless, then unwound the rope and watched pink seep back.

Rud returned and gave Mrs. Harvill a glass of water into which he measured three drops from a blue bottle. She swallowed it with

a grimace and he rewarded her with a sugar lump. If her son *had* been transformed into an adult, this business had turned her—in some sense—into a child.

A muffle of conversation could be heard through the door. The temptation to eavesdrop was a fishhook in the mind. Charles saw the doctor felt the tug even more keenly. Only the soldier was impassive, bored with this duty but grateful to be inside in the warm.

"What *can* be keeping them?" said Mrs. Harvill.

She fiddled again with her fetish, separating the rope into strands as if undoing a child's braid. The rope was Davey's new whip, which had been found in Hill Wood.

Charles could only imagine how Violet Harvill felt.

Pamela had died, along with their newborn son, after a botched delivery. He had blamed an incompetent doctor, then malign providence, and finally himself. By accepting the commission in the Hills, he had removed his family from modern medicine. A hot, hollow grief had scooped him out. He had come to accept that he would never be the man he was before, but knew Pamela would have been fiercely disappointed if he used the loss as an excuse to surrender. She had burst into his life to challenge everything he believed. Their marriage had been a wonderful, continuous explosion. In the last hours, clinging to him—biting deep into his forearm to staunch her own screams—and knowing she would die, Pamela had talked a cascade, soothing and hectoring, loving and reprimanding, advising and ordering. In London fog, he had lost the memory for a while. An engagement to Pamela's cousin, Penelope Churchward, had been his first effort at reforming a private world, and its embarrassing termination the spur to think again on what his wife had tried to tell him. As he found himself deeper in the affairs of the Diogenes Club, Pamela's voice came back. Every day, he would remember something of hers, something she had said or done. Sometimes, a twinge in his arm would be enough, a reminder that he had to live up to her.

Looking at Mrs. Harvill, he recalled the other loss, eclipsed by Pamela's long, bloody dying. His son, Richard Charles, twelve years dead, had lived less than an hour and opened his eyes only in death, face washed clean by the *ayah*. If he had been a girl, she would have been Pandora Sophie. Charles and Pamela had gotten used to calling the child "Dickie or Dora." As Pamela wished, he had served mother and child in the Indian manner, cremating them together. Most of the ashes were scattered in India, which she had loved in a way he admired but never shared. Some he had brought back to England, to placate Pamela's family. An urn rested in the vault in Kingstead Cemetery, a proper place of interment for a proper woman who would have been disowned had she spent more time at home expressing her opinions.

But what of the boy?

Losing a child is the worst thing in the world. Charles knew that, but didn't *feel* it. His son, though born, was still a part of Pamela, one loss coiled up within the other. If he ached for Dickie or Dora, it was only in the sense he sometimes felt for the other children Pamela and he would have had, the names they might have taken. The Churchwards ran to Ps and there had yet to be a Persephone, Paulus, Patricia, or Prosper.

Now he thought of the boy.

It was in him, he knew, wrapped up tight. The cold dead spot. The rage and panic. The ruthlessness.

Violet Harvill would do *anything*.

She seemed to snap out of her spell, and tied Davey's whip around her wrist, loose like a bracelet. She stood, determined.

Rud was at the parlor door.

"If you feel you're up to this, Violet . . ."

She said nothing but he opened the door. Sairey was laughing at something Davey had just said. The lad was smiling, an entirely different person.

"Mam," he said, seeing Mrs. Harvill.

Charles *knew* disaster was upon them. He was out of his chair

and across the hall, reaching for Mrs. Harvill. She was too swift for him, sensing his grasp and ducking under it. A creak at the back of her throat grew into a keening, birdlike cry. She flew into the parlor, fingers like talons.

Her nails raked across Davey's face, carving red runnels. She got a grip on his throat.

"What've you done with them?" she demanded.

A torrent of barrack abuse poured from her mouth, words Charles would once have sworn a woman could not even know—though, at the last, Pamela had used them too. Violet Harvill's face was a mask of hate.

"What've you *done*?"

Sairey tried to shift from her chair, forgetting for a moment her unaccustomed shape. With a yelp, she sat back down, holding her belly.

Riddle and Rud seized Mrs. Harvill and pulled her away. Charles stepped in and prized the woman's fingers from Davey's throat, one by one. She continued to screech and swear.

"Get her out of the room," Charles told the doctor. "Please."

There was a struggle, but it was done.

Davey was back in his huddle, knees up against his face, eyes liquid, singsonging.

"Naughty girl to disobey . . . dis-o-*bey*! Naughty girl . . ."

Sairey, careful now, hugged him, pressing his head to her full breast. He rocked back and forth.

Charles's collar had come undone and his cravat was loose.

He was responsible for this catastrophe. "He'm Davey, mister," said Sairey, softly. She didn't notice she was weeping. "No doubt 'bout it. We talked 'bout what you said. Family things. When I were little, Dad do made up stories for I, stories 'bout Silas Gobbo, a little wood-carver who lives in a hollow tree in our garden and makes furniture for birds. Dad'd make tiny tables and chairs from offcuts, put 'em in the tree, and take I out to the garden to show off Silas's new work. Dad told the tales over, to Davey and Maeve.

Loved making little toys, did Dad. No one but Davey could've known 'bout Silas Gobbo. Not 'bout the tiny tables and chairs. Even if someone else heard the stories, they couldn't *love* Silas. Davey and Maeve do. With Dad gone, loving Silas is like loving him, remembering. Maeve used to say she wanted to marry Silas when she grew up, and be a princess."

"So you're convinced?"

"Everythin' else, from last week and from years ago, the boy still has in 'en. Mam'll never accept it. I don't know how I can credit it, but it's him."

She held her brother close. Even shaved, he seemed to be twice her age.

Charles fixed his collar.

"What does he say about Maeve?"

"She'm with Silas Gobbo. He'm moved from our tree into Hill Wood. Davey says Maeve be a princess now."

5. "FILTHY AFTERNOON"

IT WAS A dreary, depressing day. Clouds boiled over Hill Wood, threatening another snowfall. The first flakes were in circulation, bestowing tiny stinging kisses.

Charles walked down Dark Lane, toward Fair Field Track. A thin fire burned in a brazier, flames whipped by harsh, contradictory winds. The fusiliers on guard were wrapped in layers of coat and cloak. The youth who had tried to make time with Rud's tweeny was still red cheeked, but now through the beginnings of frostbite.

Sergeant Beale, elaborately mustached and with eyebrows to match, did not feel the cold. If ordered to ship out, Beale would be equally up for an expedition through Arctic tundra or a trail across Sahara sands. Men like Major Chilcot only thought they ran the Empire; men like Beale actually did.

“Filthy afternoon, sir,” commented the sergeant.

“Looks like snow.”

“Looks and feels like snow, sir. Is snow.”

“Yes.”

“Not good, snow. Not for the little girl.”

“No.”

Charles understood. If this Christmas-card sprinkle turned into blizzard, any search would be off. Hope would be lost. The vanishing of Maeve Harvill would be accepted. Chilcot would pack up his soldiers and return to barracks. Charles would be recalled, to make an inconclusive report. The Small Man could open all hours of the night.

An April thaw might disclose a small, frozen corpse. Or, under the circumstances, not.

Charles looked over the trestle and into the trees.

The men of Eye and the fusiliers had both been through Hill Wood. Now, Charles—knowing he had to make sure—would have to make a third search. Of course, he wasn’t just looking for the girl.

“I’ll just step into the wood and have a look about, Sergeant.”

“Very good, sir. We’ll hold the fort.”

The guard lifted the trestle so Charles could pass.

He tried to act as if he were just out for a stroll on a bracing day, but could not pull it off. Pamela nagged: it was not just a puzzle; wounded people surrounded the mystery; they deserved more than abstract thought.

Footprints were everywhere, a heavy trample marking out Fair Field Track, scattering off in dispersal patterns to all sides. Barely a square foot of virgin white remained. The black branches of some trees were iced with snow, but most were shaken clean.

Charles could recognize fifteen different types of snake native to the Indian subcontinent, distinguishing deadly from harmless. He knew the safest covert routes into and out of the Old Jago, the worst rookery in London. He understood distinctions between

specter, apparition, phantasm, and revenant—knowledge the more remarkable for being gained firsthand rather than through dusty pedantry. But, aside from oak and elm, he could identify none of the common trees of the English countryside. Explorations of extraordinary fields had left him little time for ordinary ones.

He was missing something.

His city boots, heavily soled for cobbles, were thin and flexible. Cold seeped in at the lace holes and seams. He couldn't feel his toes.

It was a small wood. No sooner was he out of sight of Beale than the trees thinned and he saw the khaki tents pitched on Fair Field. Davey and Maeve had been *detained* here, somehow. Everyone was convinced. Could the children have slipped out unnoticed, into Fair Field and over the stile or through a gate, disappearing into regions yet to be searched? If so, somebody should have seen them. No one had come forward.

Could they have been stolen away by passing gypsies?

In Eye, gypsies or any other strangers would be noticed. So, suspicion must range closer to home. Accusations had begun to run around. Every community had its odd ones, easy to accuse of unthinkable crimes. P. C. Throttle still said it was the Dandos, a large and unruly local clan. Accusing the Dandos had solved every other mystery in Ashton and Moreton in the last thirty years, and Throttle saw no reason to change tactics now. The fact of Davey's return had called off the witch hunt. Even those who didn't believe Davey was who he claimed assumed he was at the bottom of the bad business.

If Davey was Davey, what had happened?

Charles went over the ground again, off the track this time, zigzagging across the small patch. He found objects trampled into muddy snow, which turned out to be broken pipes, a single man-sized glove, candle stubs. As much rubbish was tossed here as in a London gutter. The snowfall was thickening.

Glancing up, he saw something.

Previous searches had concentrated on the ground. If Maeve had flown away, perhaps Charles *should* direct his attention upward.

Snowflakes perished on his upturned face.

He stood before a twisted oak. A tree he could identify, even when not in leaf. An object ringed from a branch, just out of his reach. He reached up and brushed it with his fingers.

A wooden band, about eighteen inches in diameter, was loose about the branch, as if tossed onto a hook in a fairground shy. He found footholds in the trunk and climbed a yard above the ground.

He got close enough to the band to see initials burned into its inner side. *D. H.* Davey's birthday hoop.

Charles held the branch with gloved hands and let go his knee grip on the trunk. He swung out and the branch lowered, pulled by his weight. His feet lightly touched ground, the branch bent like a bow. With one hand, he nudged the hoop, trying to work it free. The branch forked and the hoop stuck.

That was a puzzle.

The obvious trick would be to break the hoop and fix it again, around the branch. But there was no break, no fix. In which case, the toy must have been hung on the tree when it was younger, and become trapped by natural growth.

The oak was older than Davey Harvill, by many human lifetimes. It was full grown when Napoleon was a boy. The hoop had not been hung last week, but must have been here since the Wars of the Roses.

He let go of the branch. It sprang back into place, jouncing the hoop. Snow dislodged from higher up.

The tree creaked, waving branches like a live thing.

Charles was chilled with more than cold.

About twenty feet from the ground, packed snow parted and fell away, revealing a black face. A pattern of knotholes, rather, shaped into a face.

We see faces in everything. It is the order we attempt to put on

the world—on clouds, stains on the wallpaper, eroded cliffs. Eyes, a nose, mouth. Expressions malign or benevolent.

This face seemed, to Charles, puckish.

"Good afternoon to you, Mr. Silas Gobbo," he said, touching his hat brim.

"Who, pray, is Silas Gobbo?"

Charles turned, heart caught by the sudden, small voice.

A little girl stood among the drifts, braids escaping from a blue cap, coat neatly done up to her muffler.

His first thought was that this was Maeve!

It struck him that he wouldn't recognize her if he saw her. He had seen no picture. There were other little girls in Eye.

"Are you looking for Maeve Harvill?" he asked. "Is she your friend?"

The little girl smiled, solemnly.

"I am Maeve," she said. "I'm a princess."

He picked her up and held her as if she were his own. Inside, he melted at this miracle. He was light-headed with an instant fast-burning elation.

"This is not how princesses should be treated, sir."

He was holding her too tight. He relaxed into a fond hug and looked down at the fresh footprints where she had been standing. Two only, as if she was set down from above, on this spot. He looked up and saw a bramble tangle of black branches against dirty sky.

He cast around for the face he had imagined, but couldn't find it again.

Maeve's dad would have said Silas Gobbo had rescued Maeve, returned her to her family.

It was the happy ending Charles wanted. He ran through his joy, and felt the chill again, the cold chill and the bone chill. He shifted the little girl, a delicate-boned miniature woman, and looked into her perfect, polite face.

"Princess, have you brothers and sisters?"

“David and Sarah.”

“Parents? Mam and Dad.”

“Father is dead. My mother is Mrs. Violet Harvill. You would do me a great service if you were to take me home. I am a tired princess.”

The little bundle was warm in his arms. She kissed his cheek and snuggled close against his shoulder.

“I might sleep as you carry me.”

“That’s all right,” he told her.

He trudged along Fair Field Track. When the guards saw him, they raised a shout.

“’E’s gone and done it!”

Charles tried a modest smile. The shout was taken up, spread around. Soon, they became hurrahs.

6. “SOMETHING ABOUT THE LITTLE GIRL”

DR. RUD’S PARLOR was filled with merry people, as if five Christmases had come along together and fetched up in a happy, laughing pile.

Mrs. Harvill clung to her princess, who had momentarily stopped ordering everyone as if they were servants. Philip and Sairey, stunned and overjoyed, pinched each other often, expecting to wake up. Sairey had to sit but couldn’t keep in one place. She kept springing up to talk with another well-wisher, then remembering the strain on her ankles. Philip had made another cake, with Maeve’s name spelled out in currants.

Rud and Major Chilcot drank port together, laughing, swapping border-war stories.

People Charles had not met were present, free with hearty thanks for the hero from London.

“We combed Hill Wood and did all we could,” said the Reverend Mr. Weddle, vicar of Eye. “Too familiar, you see, with

the terry-toree. Could not see the wood for the trees, though acts of prayer wore the trews from our knees. Took an outsider's eye in Ashton Eye, to endeavor to save the Princess Maeve. Hmm, mind if I set that down?"

Weddle had mentioned he was also a poet.

P. C. Throttle, of the long white beard and antique uniform, kept a close eye on the limping, scowling Hamer Dando—lest thieving fingers stray too close to the silverware. Hamer's face was stamped on half a dozen other locals of various ages and sexes, but Throttle was marking them all.

Charles's hand was shaken, again, by a huge-knuckled, blue-chinned man he understood to be the Ashton schoolmaster, Owain Gryfudd.

"Maeve's coming to the Welsh school now," he said, in dour triumph. "No more traipsing over the stile to that Episcopalian booby in Moreton. We shall see a great improvement."

Charles gathered Gryfudd captained an all-conquering rugby team, the Head-Hunters. They blacked their faces with coal before going onto the pitch. The teacher still had war paint around his collar and under his hairline, from frequent massacres of the English.

Cake was pressed upon Charles. Gryfudd clapped his back and roared off, bearing down on a frail old lady—Mrs. Grenton, of Moreton Eye school—as if charging for a match-winning try.

Whenever Mrs. Harvill saw Charles, she wept and—if Maeve wasn't in her arms—flung an embrace about him. She was giddy with joy and relief, and had been so for a full day.

Her princess was home.

As Sairey had said, she would never accept Davey as Davey. But Maeve's return ended the matter.

That, among other things, kept Charles from entering into the spirit of this celebration.

In this room, he sensed an overwhelming desire to put Davey and the mystery out of mind. Davey was upstairs, shut away from

the celebration.

All's well that ends well.

But Charles knew nothing had ended. And nothing was well.

He could do no more. In all probability, his report to the Ruling Cabal would be tied with pale-green ribbon and filed away forever.

He left the parlor. In the hallway, soldiers and maids sipped punch. Smiles all round.

But for Sergeant Beale.

"I suppose you'll be back to London now, sir?"

"I see no other course."

"There's something about the little girl, isn't there?"

"I fear so."

"Where *were* those kids? What happened to the boy?"

"Those, Sergeant, are the questions."

Beale nodded. He took no punch.

Charles left the sergeant and walked to the door. A tug came at his arm. Sairey held his sleeve. The woman was bent almost double. It was nearly her time. That was all this party needed: a sudden delivery and a bouncing, happy baby.

"Phil and I'll take in Davey."

"I'm glad to hear that, Sairey. I know it won't be easy."

She snorted. "Neither one'll take him in class, not Gryfudd nor Grenton. So that's an end to his schooling. And he's a clever lad, Davey. Give him a pencil and he can draw anything to the life. Mam . . . she's daffy over Maeve, hasn't any left for Davey. Won't have him in the house."

Charles patted her hand, understanding.

"And what *is* it about Maeve? She calls I 'Sarah.' I've been 'Sairey' so long I forgot what my name written down in the family Bible were."

"She doesn't know Silas Gobbo."

Sairey closed her eyes and nodded.

"She frightens I," she said, so quietly no one could overhear.

Charles squeezed her fingers. He could give no reassurance.

Riddle came into the hallway, looking for his wife. He escorted her back into the warmth and light. A cheer went up. Someone began singing . . .

"A frog he would a wooing go . . ."

"*Heigh-ho, says Rowley!*"

"And whether his mother would let him or no . . ." Other voices joined. One deep bass must be Gryfudd.

"With a roly-poly gammon and spinach . . ."

"*Heigh-ho, says Anthony Rowley!*"

Charles put on his hat and coat and left.

ACT II: UNCLE SATT'S TREASURY FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

1. "LADY OF THE LEPRECHAUNS"

"IF THAT'S THE Gift," commented a workman, "I'd likes ter know as 'oo gave it, and when they're comin' ter fetch it back."

Kate jotted the words into a notebook, in her own shorthand. The sentiment, polished through repetition, might not be original to the speaker. She liked to record what London thought and said, even when the city thought too lightly and said too often.

"Dunno what it thinks it looks like," continued the fellow.

In shirtsleeves, cap on the back of his head, he perspired heavily.

Freezing winters and boiling summers were the order of the nineties. This June threatened the scorch of the decade. She regretted the transformation of the parasol from an object of utility into a frilly aid to flirtation. As a consequence of this social phenomenon, she didn't own such an apparatus and was just now feeling the lack—and not because she wished the attention of some dozy gentleman who paid heed only to females who flapped

at him like desperate moths. Like many blessed (or cursed) with red hair, too much sun made her peel hideously. Her freckles became angry blood dots if she took a promenade sans veiled hat. Such apparel invariably tangled with her large, thick spectacles.

At the south end of Regent's Park, the Gift shone, throwing off dazzles from myriad facets. Completed too late for one Jubilee, it was embarrassingly early for the next. To get shot of a White Elephant, the bankrupt company responsible made a gift of it (hence the name) to the Corporation of London. Intended as a combination of popular theater, exhibition hall, and exotic covered garden, the sprawling labyrinth had decoration enough for any three municipal eyesores. The thing looked like a crystal circus tent whipped up by a color-blind Sunday painter and an Italian pastry chef.

It was inevitable that someone would eventually conceive of a use for the Gift. That visionary (buffoon?) was Mr. Satterthwaite Bulge, "Uncle Satt" to a generation of nieces and nephews, soi-disant Founder of Færie and Magister of Marvells (his spelling). This afternoon, she had an invitation to visit Bulge's prosperous little kingdom.

"Katharine Reed, daredevil reporter," called a voice, deep and American.

A man in a violently green checkered suit cut through gawping pass-ersby and wrung her hand. He wore an emerald bowler with a shining tin buckle, an oversize crepe four-leafed-clover boutonniere, a belt of linked discs painted like gold coins, and a russet beard fringe attached to prominent ears by wire hooks.

"Billy Quinn, *publicist*," he introduced himself, momentarily lowering his false whiskers.

She filed away the word. Was it a coinage of Quinn's? What might a publicist do? Publicize, she supposed. Make known personalities and events and products, scattering information upon the public like lumps of lava spewed from Vesuvius. She had a notion that if such a profession were to become established, her

own would be greatly complicated.

"And, of course, Oi'm a leprechaun. Ye'll be familiar with *the leettle people*."

Quinn's Boston tones contorted into an approximation of Ould Oireland. Inside high-button shoes, her toes curled.

"There's not a darter of Erin that hasn't in her heart a soft spot for Seamus O'Short."

She was Dublin born and Protestant raised. Her father, a lecturer in classics at Trinity College, drummed into her at an early age that *pots o' gold* and *wee fair folk* were baggages that need only trouble heathen Papists dwelling in the savage regions of dampest bog country. Whenever anyone English rabbited on about such things (usually affecting speech along the lines of Quinn's atavistic brogue), she was wont to change the subject to Home Rule.

"You're going to love this, Kate," he said, casually assuming the right to address her by a familiar name. She was grateful that he had reverted to his natural voice, though. "Here's your fairy sack."

He handed over a posset, with a drawstring. A stick protruded from its mouth, wound round with tinsel.

"That's your fairy wand. Inside, there's magic powder (sherbet) and a silver tiara (not silver). Tuppence to the generality, but gratis to an honored rep of the fourth estate."

Rep? Representative. Now, people were *talking* in shorthand. At least, people who were Americans and *publicists* were.

Quinn led her toward the doors of the Gift.

A lady in spangled leotards and butterfly wings attracted a male coterie, bestowing handbills while bending *just so* to display her décolletage to its best advantage, which was considerable. The voluptuous fairy had two colleagues, also singular figures. Someone in a baggy suit of brown fur and cuirass, sporting an enormous plaster bear's head surmounted by an armored helm. A dwarf with his face painted like a sad clown.

“Come one, come all,” said Quinn. “Meet Miss Fay Twinkledust, Sir Boris de Bruin, and Jack Stump.”

The trio posed *en tableau* as if for a photograph. Miss Fay and Jack Stump fixed happy grimaces on their powdered faces. Sir Boris perked up an ear through tugging on a wire. In this heat, Kate feared for the comfort and well-being of the performer trapped inside the costume.

Children flocked around, awed and wondered.

Jack Stump was perturbed by affections bestowed on him by boys and girls taller and heftier than he. Kate realized she’d seen the dwarf, dressed as a miniature mandarin, shot out of a cannon at the Tivoli Music Hall. This engagement seemed more perilous.

In the offices of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, she had done her homework and pored through a year’s worth of *Uncle Satt’s Treasury for Boys and Girls*. She was already acquainted with Miss Fay Twinkledust, Sir Boris de Bruin, Jack Stump, Seamus O’Short, and many others. Gloomy Goat and his cousins Grumpy (her favorite) and Grimy; Billy Boggart of Noggart’s Nook; Bobbin Swiftshaft, Prince of Pixies; Wicked Witch-Queen Coelacanth. The inhabitants of Uncle Satt’s Færie Aerie were beloved (or deliciously despised) by seemingly every child in the land, to the despair of parents who would rather their precious darlings practiced the pianoforte or read Euripides in the original in exactly the way they hadn’t when they were children.

Kate was out of school, and near disowned for following her disreputable Uncle Diarmid into “the scribbling trade,” well before the debuts of Miss Fay et al., but her younger brother and sisters were precisely of an age to fall into the clutches of Mr. Satterthwaite Bulge. Father, whose position on the *wee fair folk* was no longer tenable, lamented he was near financial ruin on Uncle Satt’s account, for a mere subscription to the monthly *Treasury* did not suffice to assuage clamor for matters færie related. There was also *Uncle Satt’s Færie Aerie Annual*, purchased in triplicate to prevent unseemly battles between Humphrey,

Juliet, and Susannah over whose bookshelf should have the honor of supporting the wonder volume. Furthermore, it was insisted that nursery wallpaper bear the likenesses of the færie favorites as illustrated by the artist who signed his (or her?) works “B. Loved,” reckoned by connoisseurs to be the true genius of the realm that could properly be termed “Uncle Satt’s Færie Empire.” In addition, there were china dolls and tin figures to be bought, board games to be played, pantomime theatrical events to be attended, sheet music to be performed, Noggart’s Nook sugar confections to be consumed. Every penny doled out by fond parent or grandparent to well-behaved child was earmarked for the voluminous pockets of Uncle Satt.

As a consequence, Bulge could afford the Gift. On his previous record, he could probably turn the White Elephant into the wellspring of further fortunes. Pots of gold, indeed.

The Gift was not yet open to the general public, and excited queues were already forming in anticipation. No matter how emetic the Uncle Satt oeuvre was to the average adult, children were as lost to his Færie as the children of Hamelin were to the Pied Piper.

A little girl, no more than four, hugged Sir Boris’s leg, rubbing her cheek against his fur, smiling with pure bliss.

“We don’t pay these people,” Quinn assured her. “We don’t have to. To be honest, we would if we did but we don’t. This is all gin-u-wine.”

Some grown-ups were won over to the enemy or found it politic to claim so, lest they be accused of stifling the childish heart reputed to beat still in the breasts of even the hardest cynics. Many of her acquaintances, well into mature years and possessed of sterling intellects (some *not even parents*), proclaimed devotion to Uncle Satt, expressing admiration, if not for the literary effulgences then for the talents, of the mysterious, visionary “B. Loved.” Even Bernard Shaw, whose stinging notice of “A Visit to the Færie Aerie” led to a splashing with glue by pixie partisans,

praised the illustrations, hailing “B. Loved” a titan shackled by daisy chains. The pictures, it had to be said, were haunting, unusual and impressive, simple in technique, yet imbued with a suggestiveness close to disturbing. Their dreamy vagueness would have passed for avant-garde in some salons, but was paradoxically embraced (beloved, indeed) by child and adult alike. Aubrey Beardsley was still sulking because B. Loved declined to contribute to a færie-themed number of *The Yellow Book*, though it was bruited about that the refusal was mandated by Uncle Satt, who had the mystery painter signed to an exclusive contract. It was sometimes hinted that Bulge *was* B. Loved. Other theories had the illustrator as an asylum inmate who had sewn his own eyes shut but continued to cover paper with the images swarming inside his broken mind, a spirit medium who gave herself up to an inhabitant of another plane as she sat at the board, or a factory in Aldgate staffed by unlettered Russian immigrants overseen by a knout-wielding monk.

“Come inside,” said Quinn. “Though you must first pass these Three Merry Guardians.”

The publicist opened a little gate and ushered Kate into an enclosure that led to the main doors. The entrance was painted to look like the covers of a pair of magical books. Above was a red-cheeked, smiling, sparkle-eyed caricature of Uncle Satt, fat finger extended to part the pages.

Envious glares came from the many children not yet admitted to the attraction. Cutting comments were passed by parents whose offers of bribes had not impressed the Three Merry Guardians. Kate had an idea that, if his comrades were looking the other way, Jack Stump would not have been averse to slipping a half crown into his boot and lifting a tent corner.

“This is a Lady of the Leprechauns,” said Quinn, to appease the crowds, “on a diplomatic visit to Uncle Satt. The Gift will open to one and all this very weekend. The Færie Aerie isn’t yet ready to receive visitors.”

A collective moan of disappointment rose.

Quinn shrugged at her.

Kate stepped toward the main doors. Long, hairy arms encircled her, preventing further movement. Sir Boris de Bruin shook with silent laughter.

This was very irritating!

"I had almost forgotten," said Quinn. "Before you enter, what must you do?"

She was baffled. The bear was close to taking liberties.

"What must she do, boys and girls?" Quinn asked the crowd.

"Færie name! Færie name!"

"That's right, boys and girls. The Lady of the Leprechauns must take her færie name!"

"Katharine Reed," she suggested. "Um, Kate, Katie?"

"*Nooooo*," said Quinn, milking it. "A new name. A true name. A name fit for the councils of Bobbin Swiftshaft and Billy Boggart."

"Grumpia Goatess," she ventured, quietly. She knew her face was red. The bear's bristles were scraping.

"I have the very name! Brenda Banshee!"

Kate, surprised, was horrified.

"Brenda Banshee, Brenda Banshee," chanted the children. Many of them booed.

Brenda Banshee was the sloppy maidservant in the house of Seamus O'Short, always left howling at the end of the tale. It struck Kate that the leprechaun was less than an ideal employer, given to perpetrating "hi-larious pranks" on his staff, then laughing uproariously at their humiliations. In the real world, absentee landlords in Ireland were *boycotted* for less objectionable behavior than Seamus got away with every month.

"What does Brenda Banshee do?" asked Quinn.

"She howls! She howls!"

"If you think I'm going to howl," she told Sir Boris quietly, "you're very much mistaken."

"Howl, Brenda," said Quinn, grinning. "Howl for the boys and

girls."

She set her lips tight.

If Brenda Banshee was always trying to filch coins from her employer's belt o' gold, it was probably because she was an indentured servant and received no wages for her drudgery.

"I think you'd howl most prettily," whispered Sir Boris de Bruin.

It dawned on her that she knew the voice.

She looked into the bear's mouth and saw familiar eyes.

"*Charles?*"

"If I can wear this, you can howl."

She was astounded, and very conscious of the embrace in which she was trapped. Her face, she knew, was burning.

"Please howl," demanded Quinn, enjoying himself.

Kate screwed her eyes shut and howled. It sounded reedy and feeble. Sir Boris gave her an encouraging, impertinent squeeze.

She howled enough to raise a round of applause.

"Very nice, Brenda," said Quinn. "Howl-arious. Shall we go inside?"

The book covers opened.

2. "DETAILS, YOUNG MISS"

WHAT *DID* CHARLES Beauregard think he was about?

She scarcely believed an agent of the Diogenes Club would take it into his head to supplement his income by dressing up as a storybook bear in the service of Mr. Satterthwaite Bulge. She recalled John Watson's story in *The Strand Magazine* of the respectable suburban husband who earned a healthy living in disguise as a deformed beggar. Kate wondered at the ethics of publicizing such a singular case; it now served as an excuse for the smugly well-off to scorn genuine unfortunates on the grounds that "they doubtless earn more than a barrister." Money would not

come into this. Charles was of the stripe who does nothing for purely financial reward. Of course, he could afford his scruples. He did not toil in an underpaid calling still only marginally willing to accept those of her sex. The profession Neville St. Clair had found less lucrative than beggary was her own, journalism.

Sir Boris hung back as Quinn escorted her along a low-ceilinged tunnel hung with green-threaded muslin. Underfoot was horsehair matting, dyed dark green to approximate forest grass.

"We proceed along the Airy Path, to Noggart's Nook . . ."

Quinn led her to a huge tree trunk that blocked the way. The plaster creation was intricate, with grinning goblin faces worked into the bark. Their eyes glowed, courtesy of dabs of luminous paint. An elaborate mechanical robin chirruped in the branches. Quinn rapped three times on the oak. Hidden doors opened inward.

". . . and into the Realm of Bobbin Swiftshaft, Prince of the Pixies . . ."

Kate stepped into the tree, and down three shallow steps. Cloth trailed over her face.

"Mind how you go."

She had walked into a curtain. Extricating herself, she found she was in a vaulted space: at once cathedral, big top, and planetarium. The dome sparkled with constellations, arranged to form the familiar shapes of B. Loved creatures. Miss Fay, Bobbin Swiftshaft, Jack Stump, Sir Boris, Seamus, and the rest cavorted across the painted, glittering ceiling. Tinsel streamers hung, catching the light. All around was a half-sized landscape, suitable for little folk, created through tamed nature and theatrical artifice. Kate, who spent most of her life peering up at people, was here taller than the tallest tree—many were genuine dwarves cultivated in the Japanese manner, not stage fakery—and a giant beside the dwellings. The woods were fully outfitted with huts and palaces, caves and castles, stone circles and hunting lodges. Paths wound prettily through miniature woodland. Water flowed from a

fountain shaped like the mouth of a big bullfrog, whose name and station escaped her. The respectable torrent poured prettily over a waterfall, agitated a pond beneath, and passed out of the realm as a stream that disappeared into a cavern. An iron grille barred the outflow, lest small persons tumble in and be swept away.

All around were strange gleams, in the air and inside objects.

"The light," she said, "it's unearthly."

Looking close, she found semi-concealed glass globes and tubes, each containing a fizzing glowworm. Some were tinted subtle ruby red or turquoise. They shone like the eyes of ghosts.

"We're mighty proud of the lighting," said Quinn. "We use only Edison's incandescents, which burn through the wizardry of the age, *electricity*. Beneath our feet are vast dynamos, which churn to keep the Aerie illuminated. The Gift quite literally puts the Savoy in the shade."

Mr. D'Oyly Carte's Savoy Theatre had been fully electrified for over a decade. Some metropolitan private homes were lit by Edison lamps, though the gas companies were fighting a vicious rearguard campaign against electrification, fearing the fate of the candlemakers. Despite scare stories, the uninformed no longer feared lightning strikes from newfangled gadgetry. They also no longer gasped in wonder at the mere use of an electrical current to spin a wheel or light a room. There was a risk that electric power would be relegated to quack medicinal devices like the galvanic weight-loss corset. In America, electrocution was used as a means of execution; in Britain, the process was most familiar from advertisements for the miracle food Bovril—allegedly produced by strapping a cow into an electric chair and throwing the switch. From H. G. Wells, the *Pall Mall Gazette*'s scientific correspondent, Kate gathered the coming century would be an Era of Electricity. At present, the spark seemed consigned to trivial distraction; that was certainly the case here.

A bulb atop a lantern pole hissed, flared, and popped. A tinkling rain of glass shards fell.

“Some trivial teething troubles,” said Quinn.

A lanky fellow in an overall rushed to attend to the lantern. He extracted the burned-out remains, ouching as his fingers came into contact with the hot ruin. He deftly screwed in a replacement, which began at once to glow, its light rising to full brightness. Another minion was already sweeping the fragments into a pan for easy disposal.

“Unusual-looking elves,” she commented.

“It takes a crew of twenty-five trained men to keep the show going,” said Quinn. “When the Gift is open, they *will* be elves. Each will have their own character and place.”

Uncle Satt was insistent that in Færie, as in mundane society, there was a strict order of things. If a woodsman wed a fairy princess, it was a dead cert he was a prince in disguise rather than a real peasant. The reader was expected to guess as much from a well-born character’s attention to personal cleanliness. Children knew the exact forms of protocol in Uncle Satt’s imaginary kingdom, baffling adults with nursery arguments about whether a knight transformed into a bear by Witch-Queen Coelacanth outranked a tiger-headed maharajah from Far-Off Indee.

Charles had shambled in and was sitting on a wooden bench, head inclined so he could talk quietly with one of the worker elves. Quinn had not noticed that Sir Boris had abandoned the other Merry Guardians.

When Mr. Henry Cockayne-Cust, her editor, sent Kate to the Gift, she had considered it a rent-paying exercise, a story destined for the depths of the inside pages. Much of her work was fish wrap before it had a chance to be read. It was a step up from “Ladies Notes”—to which editors often tried to confine her, despite an evident lack of interest in the intricacies of fashionable feminine apparel or the supervision of servants—but not quite on a level with theater criticism, to which she turned her pen in a pinch, which is to say when the *Gazette*’s official reviewer fell asleep during a first night.

An item (“puff piece”) about the Færie Aerie seemed doomed to fall into the increasingly large purview of Quinn’s profession. She lamented the colonization of journalism by organized boosterism and the advertising trade. In some publications, people were deemed worthy of interest because of a happenstance rather than genuine achievement. The day might come when passing distraction was valued higher than matters of moment. She held it a sacred duty to resist.

If Mr. Charles Beauregard, if *the Diogenes Club*, took an interest in the Gift, an interest was worth taking. Some aspect of the endeavor not yet apparent would likely prove, in her uncle’s parlance, “newsworthy.”

Quinn’s jibe about “daredevil” lady reporters had niggled. Now, she wondered whether there might not be a devil here to dare.

“This, dear Brenda, is Uncle Satt.”

While she was thinking, Mr. Satterthwaite Bulge had come up out of the ground.

Illustrations made Bulge a cherubic fat man, a clean-shaven Father Christmas or sober Bacchus, always drawn with gleam a-twinkle in his bright eye and smile a-twitch on his full, girlish lips. In person, Bulge was indeed stout but with no discernible expression. His face was the color of thin milk, and so were his longish hair and thinnish lips. His eyes were the faded blue of china left on a shelf that gets too much sun. He wore sober clothes of old-fashioned cut, like a provincial alderman who stretches one good suit to last a lifetime in office. Bulge seemed like an artist’s blank: a hole where a portrait would be drawn. More charitably, she thought of actors who walked through rehearsals, hitting marks and reciting lines without error, but withheld their *performance* until opening night, saving passion for paying customers.

Bulge had climbed a ladder and emerged through a trapdoor, followed by another elf, a clerkish type with clips on his sleeves

and a green eyeshade.

"This is Katharine Reed, of the *Pall Mall Gazette*," said Quinn.

"What's the circulation?" asked Bulge.

"Quite large, I'll wager," she said. "We're under orders not to reveal too much."

That, she knew, was feeble. In fact, she had no idea.

"I know to the precise number what the *Treasury* sells by the month. I know to the farthing what profit is to be had from the *Annual*. Details, young miss, that is the stuff of my enterprise, of *all* enterprises. Another word for *detail* is *penny*. Pennies are hard to come by. It is a lesson the *dear children* learn early."

She did not think she would ever be able to call this man "Uncle." The instant Bulge used the phrase "the dear children" and slid his lips into something he fondly imagined to be a smile, Kate knew his deepest, darkest secret. Mr. Satterthwaite Bulge, Uncle Satt of *Uncle Satt's Treasury for Boys and Girls*, greatly disliked children. It was an astonishing intuition. When Bulge used the word *dear*, his meaning was not "beloved" but "expensive." Some parents, not least her own, might secretly agree.

"Do you consider the prime purpose of your enterprise to be educational?" she asked.

Bulge was impatient with the attempt at interview.

"That's covered in the, ah, what do you call the thing, Quinn . . . the *press release*. Yes, it's all covered in that. Questions, any you might ask, have already been answered. I see no purpose in repeating myself."

"She has the press release, Mr. Bulge," said Quinn.

"Good. You're doing your job. Young miss, I suggest you do yours. Why, all you have to do to manufacture an article is pen a general introduction, copy out Quinn's *release*, and sign your name. Then you have your *interview with Uncle Satt* at a minimum of effort. A fine day's work, I imagine. A pretty penny earned."

The flaw, of course, was that she was not the only member of the press to receive the "release." If an article essentially identical

to her own appeared in a rival paper, she would hear from Mr. Harry Cust. The editor could as devastatingly direct disapproval in person at one tiny reporter as, through editorial campaign, an entire segment of society or tier of government. For that reason, the excellent and detailed brochure furnished by Quinn lay among spindled documents destined for use as tapers. The "press release" would serve to transfer flame from the grate to that plague of cigarettes that rendered the air in any newspaper office more noxious than the streets during the worst of a pea-soup fog.

"If I could ask a few supplementary questions, addressing matters touched upon but not explored in the release . . ."

"I can't be doing with this now," said Bulge. "Many things have to be seen to if the Gift is to open to the *dear children* on schedule."

"Might I talk with others involved? For instance, B. Loved remains a man of mystery. If the curtain were lifted and a few facts revealed about the artist, you could guarantee a great deal of, ah, *publicity*."

Bulge snorted. "I *have* a great deal of publicity, young miss."

"But . . ."

"There's no mystery about Loved. He's just a man with a paint box."

"So, B. Loved *is* a man then, *one* man, not . . ."

"Talk with Quinn," Bulge insisted. "It's his job. Don't bother anyone else. None can afford breaks for idle chatter. It's all we can do to keep everyone about their work, without distractions."

Quinn, realizing his employer was not making the best impression, stepped in.

"I'll be delighted to show Kate around."

"You do that, Quinn."

"She has her fairy sack."

Kate held it up.

"Tuppence lost," said Bulge. "Quinn's extravagances will be the ruin of me, young miss. I am surrounded by spendthrifts who care

naught for *details*."

"Remember, sir," said Quinn, mildly, "the matter we discussed . . ."

Bulge snorted. "Indeed, I do. More jargon. *Public image*, indeed. Arrant mumbo jumbo and impertinence."

If Uncle Satt wrote a word published under his name, Kate would be astounded. On the strength of this acquaintance, she could hardly believe he even *read* his own periodicals. Which begged the question of what exactly he did in his empire.

See to details? Add up pennies?

If B. Loved was a man with a paint box, was he perhaps on the premises? If not painting murals himself, then supervising their creation. She had an intuition that the trail of the artist might be worth following.

A nearby tower toppled, at first slowly with a ripping like stiff paper being torn, and then rapidly, with an almighty crash, trailing wires that sparked and snapped, whipcracking toward the stream.

Bulge looked at Kate darkly, as if he suspected sabotage.

"You see, I am busy. These things *will* keep happening . . ."

Wires leaped like angry snakes. Elves kept well away from them.

"Accidents?" she asked.

"Obstacles," responded Bulge.

Bulge strode off and stared down the cables, which died and lay still. The electric lamps dimmed, leaving only cinder ghosts in the dark. Groans went up all around.

"Not again," grumbled an elf.

Someone struck a match.

Where the tower had fallen, a stretch of painted woodland was torn away, exposing bare lath. Matches flared all around and old-fashioned lanterns lit. It was less magical, but more practical.

"What is it this time, Sackham?"

"Been chewed through, Uncle," diagnosed the clerk, examining

the damage. “Like before.”

Bulge began issuing orders.

Kate took the opportunity to slip away. She hoped Bulge’s attention to details would not extend to keeping track of her.

These things will *keep happening*.

That was interesting. That was what they called a lead.

3. “GOBLINS”

“IS THIS A common event?” she asked an idling elf.

“Not ’arf,” came the reply. “If it ain’t breakin’ down, it’s fallin’ down. If it ain’t burnin’ up, it’s messin’ up.”

This particular elf was staying well out of the way. Several of his comrades, under the impatient supervision of Uncle Satt, were lifting the fallen tower out of the stream. Others, mouths full of nails and hammers in their hands, effected emergency repairs.

“They says it’s the *goblins*.”

Kate wanted to laugh, but her chuckle died.

“No, ma’am,” said the elf, “it’s serious. Some ’ave seen ’em, they say, then upped and left, walkin’ away from good wages. That’s not a natural thing, ma’am, not with times as they are and honest labor ’ard to come by.”

“But . . . goblins?”

“Nasty little blighters, they say. Fingernails like teeth, an’ teeth like needles. Always chewin’ and clawin’, weakenin’ things so they collapse. Usually when there’s someone underneath for to be collapsed upon. The craytors get into the machinery, gum up the works. Them big dynamos grind to a ’alt with a din like the world crackin’ open.”

She thought about this report.

“You mean this is sabotage? Has Satterthwaite Bulge deadly rivals in the færie business? Interests set against the opening of the Gift?”

“What business is it of yours?”

The elf realized for the first time he had no idea who she was. Her relative invisibility was often an aid in her profession; many forgot she was there even as they talked to her. Now, her spell of insignificance was wearing off.

“Miss Reed is a colleague, Blenkins,” came a voice.

They had been joined by a bear. His presence reassured the elf Blenkins.

“If you say so, Sir Boris,” he allowed. “My ’pologies, ma’am. A bloke ’as to be careful round ’ere.”

“A bloke always has to be careful around Miss Reed.”

She hoped that, in the gloom, Charles could not discern the fearful burning of her cheeks. When he first strolled into her life, Kate was thirteen and determined to despise the villain set upon fetching away her idol, Pamela Churchward. Father was lecturing at London University for a year, and Kate found herself absorbed into the large, complicated circle of the Churchwards. The beautiful, wise Pamela was the first woman ever to encourage Kate’s ambitions. Her engagement seemed a treacherous defection, for all the bride-to-be insisted marriage would not end her independent life. Penelope, Pamela’s ten-year-old cousin, said bluntly that Kate’s complexion meant she would end up a governess or, at best, palmed off as wife to an untenured, adenoidal lecturer. Just then, as Kate was trying in vain not to cry, Pamela introduced her princely fiancé to her protégé.

Of course, Kate had fallen *horribly* in love with Charles. She doubted she had uttered a coherent sentence in his presence until he was a young widower. By then, courtesy of interesting, if brief liaisons with Mr. Frank Harris, another editor, and several others, none of whom she regretted, she was what earlier decades might have branded *a fallen woman*.

Now, with Pamela gone and pernicious Penelope in retreat, she knew the thirteen-year-old nestled inside her thirty-two-year-old person remained smitten with the Man from the Diogenes Club. As

a grown-up, she was more sensible than to indulge such silliness. It irritated her when he pretended to think she was still a tiny girl with rope braids down to her waist and cheeks of pillar-box red. It was, she knew, *only* pretense. Like his late wife (whom she still missed *so*), Charles Beauregard was among the select company who took Katharine Reed seriously.

"Sir Boris, you do me an injustice."

The bear head waved from side to side.

For once, she was not the most ridiculous personage in the room.

"Still, I'm sure you intended to be a very gallant bear."

She reached up and tickled the fur around his helm. It was painted plaster and she left white scratches. She stroked his arm, which was more convincing.

Blenkins slipped away, leaving them alone.

"There's a catch at the back," Charles said, muffled. "Like a diver's helmet. If you would do me the courtesy . . ."

"You can't get out of this on your own?"

"As it happens, no."

She found the catch and flipped it. Charles placed his paws over his ears and rotated his head ninety degrees so the muzzle pointed sideways, then lifted the thing free. A definite musk escaped from the decapitated costume. Charles's face was blacked like Mr. G. F. Elliott, the music hall act billed as "the Chocolate-Colored Coon." She found Elliott only marginally less unappealing than those comic turns who presented gormless, black-toothed caricatures of her own race. Charles's makeup was to prevent white skin showing through Sir Boris's mouth.

He whipped off a paw and scratched his chin.

"I've been desperate to do that for hours," he admitted.

He used his paw glove to wipe his face. She took pity, produced a man-size handkerchief from her cuff and set about properly cleaning off the burnt cork. He sat on a wooden toadstool and leaned forward so she could pay close attention to the task.

“Thank you, Mama,” he teased.

She swatted him with the blacked kerchief.

“I could leave you looking like a Welsh miner.”

He shut up and let her finish. The face of Charles Beauregard emerged. Weary, to be sure, but recognizable.

“You’ve shaved your cavalry whiskers,” she observed.

His hand went to his neatly trimmed mustache.

“A touch of the creeping grays, I suspect,” she added, wickedly.

“Good grief, Katie,” said Charles, “you’re worse than Mycroft’s brother!”

“I’m right, though, am I not?”

“There was a certain *tinge* of dignified white,” he admitted, shyly, “which I estimated could be eliminated by judicious barbering.”

“Considering your calling, I’m surprised every hair on your person hasn’t been bleached. It’s said to be a common side effect of stark terror.”

“So I am reliably informed.”

He undid strings at the back of his neck and shrugged the bear suit loose, then stepped out of the top half of the costume. The cuirass, leather painted like steel, unlaced down the back to allow escape from straitjacket-like confines. Underneath, he wore a grimy shirt, with no collar. High-waisted but clownishly baggy furry breeches stuck into heroic boots that completed the ensemble.

“The things you do for Queen and Country, Charles.”

He looked momentarily sheepish.

“*Charles?*”

“I’m at present acting on my own initiative.”

This was puzzling and most unlike Charles. But she knew what had brought him here. She had seized at once on the “newsworthy” aspect of the Gift.

“It’s the *goblins*, isn’t it?”

He flashed a humorless smile.

“Still sharp as ever, Kate? Yes, it’s Blenkins’s blinkin’ goblins.”

The hammering and tower-raising continued. The electric lights fizzled on again, then out. Then on, to burn steady. Charles instinctively stepped back, into a shadowed alcove, drawing Kate with him.

Bulge flapped a list of to-do tasks at the elves. Mr. Sackham was presently at the receiving end of the brunt of Uncle Satt’s opprobrium.

“What do you know that I don’t?” she asked Charles.

“That’s a big question.”

She hit him on the arm. Quite hard.

“You deserved that.”

“Indeed I did. My apologies, Katie. Life inside a bear costume is, I’m afraid, a strain on any temperament. When the Gift opens to the public, I should not care to let a child of my acquaintance within easy reach of anyone forced, as the ‘show business’ slang has it, ‘to wear a head.’ An hour of such imprisonment transforms the most patient soul into Grendel, eager for a small, helpless person upon whom to slake his wrath.”

“You have my promise that I shall write a blistering exposé of this cruel practice. The cause of the afflicted ‘head-wearers’ shall become as known as, in an earlier age, that of the children employed as human chimney brushes or, as now, those drabs sold as ‘maiden tributes of modern Babylon.’ A committee shall be formed and strong letters written to members of parliament. Fairies will chain themselves to the railings. None shall be allowed to rest in the halls of justice until the magic bears are free!”

“Now *you’re* teasing *me*.”

“I have earned that right.”

“That you have, Katie.”

“Now this amusing diversion is at an end, I refer you back to my initial question. What do you know that I don’t?”

Charles sighed. She had sidestepped him again. She wondered if he ever regretted that she was no longer tongue-tied in his

presence.

"Not much," he admitted, "and I can't talk about it here. If you would meet me outside in half an hour. I am acting on my own initiative and honestly welcome your views."

"This goblin hunt?"

"That's part of it."

"Part only?"

"Part only."

"I shall wait half an hour, no longer."

"It will take that to become presentable. I can't shamble as a demi-bear among afternoon promenaders."

"Indeed. Panic would ensue. Men with nets would be summoned. As an obvious chimera, you would be captured and confined to the conveniently nearby London Zoo. Destined to be stuffed and presented to the Natural History Museum."

"I'm so glad you understand."

He kissed her forehead, which reddened her again. She was grateful her blushes wouldn't show up under the electric lamps.

4. "A PALE-GREEN RIBBON"

A FULL FORTY-FIVE minutes later, Kate was still waiting in the park. On this pleasant afternoon, many freed from places of employment were not yet disposed to return to their homes. A gathering of shopgirls chirruped, competing for the attention of a smooth-faced youth who sported a cricket cap and a racy striped jacket. Evidently quite a wit, his flow of comments on the peculiarities of passersby kept his pretty flock in fits.

"With her colorin' and mouth," drawled the champion lad, "it's a wonder she ain't forever bein' mistook for a pillar box."

Much hilarity among the *filles des estaminets*.

"Oh Max, you are so *wicked* . . . you shouldn't ought to say such things . . ."

Kate supposed she *was* redder than usual. The condition came upon her when amused, embarrassed, or—as in this case—annoyed.

"I 'magine she's waitin' to be emptied."

"The postman's running late today," ventured the boldest of the girls.

"Bad show, what. To leave such a pert postbox unattended."

Charles emerged from the Gift at last, more typically clothed. Most would take him for a clubman fresh from a day's idleness and up for an evening's foolery.

As he approached, the girls' attention was removed entirely from Max. Their eyes followed Charles's saunter. He did such a fine job of pretending not to notice that only Kate was not fooled.

"He must have a letter that *desperately* needs postin'," said the amusing youth.

"If you will excuse me," said Charles, raising a finger.

He walked over to the group, who fluttered and gathered around Merry Max. Charles took a firm grip on the youth's ear and dragged him to Kate. The cap fell off, revealing that his cultivated forelock was a lonely survivor on an otherwise hairless scalp.

"This fellow has something to say to you, Kate."

"Sorry," came the strangled bleat, "no 'ffence meant."

Now someone was redder than she. Max's pate was practically vermilion.

"None taken."

Charles let Max go and he fell over. When he sat up again, his congregation was flown, seeking another hero. He snatched up his cap and slunk off.

"I suppose you expect me to be grateful for your protection, Sir Boris?"

Charles shrugged. "After a day in the bear head, I had to thump *someone*. Max happened to be convenient. He was making 'short' jokes about Jack Stump earlier."

"I believe you."

He looked at her, and she was thirteen again. Then she was an annoyed grown-up woman.

"No, really. I do."

Charles glanced back at the Gift.

"So, Mr. Beauregard, what's the story? Why take an interest in Uncle Satt?"

"Bulge is incidental. The mermaid on the front of the ship. Oh, he's the one who's made the fortune. But he's not the treasure of the *Treasury*. That's the other fellow, the mysterious cove . . ."

"B. Loved?"

Charles tapped her forehead.

"Spot on. The artist."

"What does the B stand for?"

"David."

"Beloved. From the Hebrew."

"Indeed. Davey Harvill, as was. B. Loved, as is."

The name meant nothing to her.

"Young Davey is a singular fellow. We met eight years ago, in Herefordshire. He had an unusual experience. The sort of unusual that comes under my purview."

It was fairly openly acknowledged that the Diogenes Club was a clearing-house for the British secret service. Less known was its occult remit. While the Society for Psychical Research could reliably gather data on cold spots or fraudulent mediums, they were hardly equipped to cope with supernatural occurrences that constituted a threat to the natural order of things. If a spook clanked chains or formed faces in the muslin, a run-of-the-mill ghost-finder was more than qualified to provide reassurance; if it could hurt you, then the Ruling Cabal sent Charles Beauregard.

"Davey was lost in the woods and found much older than he should be. I don't mean aged by terrible experience, your 'side effects of stark terror.' He disappeared a child of nine and returned a full-grown man, as if twenty years had passed over a weekend."

"You established there was no imposture?"

“To my satisfaction.”

Kate thought, tapping her teeth with a knuckle. “But not to everyone’s?”

Charles spread his hands. “The lad’s mother could never accept him.”

She had a pang of sympathy for this boy she had never met.

“What happened after he was returned?”

“Interesting choice of words. ‘Was returned’? Suggests an agency over which he had no control. Might he not have *escaped*? Davey was taken in by his older sister, Sarah Riddle. Maeve Harvill, Davey’s other sister, also went into the woods. She came out like her normal self and was embraced by the mother. Sadly, Mrs. Harvill died some time afterward. I have questions about that, but we can get to them later. Sarah, herself the mother of a young son, became sole parent to both her siblings. By then, Davey was drawing.”

“The færie pictures?”

“They poured from his pencils,” said Charles. “He does it all with pencils, you know. Not charcoal. The pictures became more intense, more captivating. You’ve seen them?”

“Who hasn’t?”

“Quite. That’s down to Evelyn Weddle̦, the vicar of Eye. He took an interest, and brought Davey’s pictures to the attention of a Glamorgan printer.”

“Satterthwaite Bulge?”

“Indeed. Bulge, quite against his nature, was captivated. The pictures have strange effects, as the whole world now knows. Bulge put together the first number of his *Treasury*. It made his name.”

“Who writes the copy?”

“At first, Weddle. He’s the sort of poet, alas, who rhymes ‘pixie’ with ‘tipsy’ and ‘færie’ with ‘hurry.’ Don’t you hate that diphthong, by the way. It’s one step away from an umlaut. What’s wrong with f-a-i-r-y, I’d like to know? The vicar was so flattered to see his

verses immortalized by typesetting that he cared not that his name wasn't appended. He fell by the wayside early on. Now, Bulge has many scribbling elves—though he oversees them all, and contrives to imprint his own concerns upon the work. All that business about washing your hands, respecting princes, and punishing servants. Leslie Sackham, whom you saw dancing attendance, is currently principal quill-pushing elf. They are interchangeable and rarely last more than a few months, but there's only one B. Loved."

"Is this golden egg–laying goose chained to an easel?"

Charles shook his head. "His artistry is of a *compulsive* nature. The *Treasury* can't keep up with the flow. Even under a hugely unfair personal contract the Harvills knew no better than to accept, Davey has become very well off."

She thought of the illustrations, wondering if she would see them differently now she had some idea about their creator. They had always seemed portals into another, private world.

"What does Davey say about the time he was away?"

"He *says* little. He claims an almost complete loss of memory."

"But he draws. You think not from imagination, but from life?"

"I don't suppose he is representing a literal truth, no. But I am certain his pictures spring from the place he and his sister were taken—and I do believe they were *taken*—whether it be a literal Realm of Færie or not."

"You know the stories . . ."

Charles caught her meaning. ". . . Of the little people, and babies snatched from their cribs? Changelings left in their stead? Very Irish."

"Not in the Reed household. At least, not until the rise of Uncle Satt. But, yes, those stories."

"They aren't confined to the Emerald Isle. Ten years ago in Sussex, a little girl named Rose Farrar was allegedly spirited away by 'angels.' That's an authenticated case. We took an interest. Rose is still listed among the missing."

“It’s not just leprechauns. Someone is always accused of child abduction. Mysterious folk, outsiders, alien. Dark complected, most like. Wicked to the bone. There are the stories of the Pied Piper and the Snow Queen. Robbers, imps, and devils; Red Indians, the gypsies . . .”

“Funny you should mention gypsies.”

“Tinkers, in Ireland. Have they ever *really* stolen babies? Why on earth would they want to? Babies are bothersome, I’m given to understand. Nonsense is usually spouted about strengthening the blood stock of a small population, but surely you’d do better taking grown-up women for that. No, it seems to me that the interest of the stories is in the people who tell them. There is a *purpose*, a lesson. Don’t go wandering off, children, for you might fall down a well. Don’t talk to strangers, for they might eat you.”

Afternoon had slid into evening. One set of idlers had departed, and a fresh crowd come upon the scene. This was a park, not wild woods. Nature was trimmed and tamed, hemmed in by city streets and patrolled by wardens. Treetops were black with soot.

A shout went up nearby, a governess calling her charge.

“Master Timothy! Timmy!”

Kate felt a clutch of dread. Here, in the press of people, was more danger than in all the trackless woods of England. Scattered among the bland, normal faces were blood-red, murderous hearts. She had attended enough coroner’s courts to know imps and angels were superfluous in the metropolis. Caligula could pass, unnoticed, in a celluloid collar.

Master Timothy was found and smothered with tearful kisses. He didn’t look grateful. Catching sight of Kate, he stuck out a fat little tongue at her.

“Beast,” she commented.

Charles looked for a moment as if he were going to serve the ungracious little perisher as he had Merry Max. She laid a hand in the crook of his arm. She did not care to be complicit with another assault. Charles laid his hand on hers and tapped, understanding,

amused.

"The Diogenes Club has a category for everything," he said, "no matter how outré. Maps of Atlantis—we have dozens of them, properly cataloged and folded. Hauntings, tabulated and subcategorized, with pins marked into ordnance survey charts and patterns studied by our learned consultants. Witch cults, ranked by the degree of unpleasantness involved in their ritual behavior and the trouble caused in various quarters of the Empire. There's also a category for mysteries without solution. Matters we have looked into but been unable to form a conclusion upon. Like the diplomat Benjamin Bathurst, who 'walked around the horses' and vanished without trace. Or little Rose Farrar."

"The *Mary Celeste*?"

"Actually, we did fathom that. It remains under the rose for the moment. We've no pressing desire to go to war with the United States of America."

She let that pass.

"Unsolved matters constitute a large category," he continued. "Most of my reports are inconclusive. A strategy has formed for such cases. We tie a pale-green ribbon around the file and shelve it in a windowless room behind a door that looks like a cupboard. The Ruling Cabal, which is to say you-know-who, disapproves of fussing with green-ribbon files. As he says, 'when you are unable to eliminate the impossible, don't waste too much time worrying about it.' The ribbons are knotted tight and difficult to unpick—though, from time to time, further information comes to light. Of course, it's easier to work in the green-ribbon room if you think of *people* as *cases*."

"And you can't?"

"No more than you can. No, I don't mean that, Katie. You, more than anyone, are immune to that tendency. I am not. I concede that sometimes it helps to consider mysteries purely as puzzles. Pamela would nag me about it. She always thought of *people* first, last, and always."

Pamela's name did not come up often between them. It did not need to.

"So, in her memory and for fear of disappointing you, I tied the pale-green ribbon loosely around Davey Harvill. I had thought the whole thing buried in Eye, a local wonder soon forgotten. However, here we are in the heart of London, before Davey's færie recreated. There are the goblins to consider. Blenkins's goblins. How did they creep into the picture?"

Kate snapped her fingers. "That's how B. Loved draws goblins, hidden as if they've crept in. You have to look twice, sometimes very closely, to see them, disguised against tree bark or peeping out of long grass. In the *Annual*, there's a plate entitled, 'How many goblins are being naughty in this picture?' It shows a country market in an uproar."

"There are twenty-seven goblins in the picture. All being naughty."

"I found twenty-nine."

"Yes, well, that's a game. This is not. Workmen have been injured. Nipped as if by tiny teeth. Rats, they say. The thing is, when it's rats, parties involved usually say it isn't. *That's* when they talk about mischievous imps. No one who wants to draw in crowds of children likes to mention the tiniest rat problem. But here everyone says it's rats. Except Blenkins, and he's been told to shut up."

". . . if it can hurt you . . ."

"I beg your pardon."

"Just something I was thinking of earlier."

There was another commotion. Kate assumed Timmy had fled his governess again, but that was not the case.

"Speak of the devil . . ."

Blenkins was running through the crowds, clearly in distress.

He saw Charles and dashed over, out of breath.

"Mr. B," he said, "it's terrible what they done . . ."

Police whistles shrilled nearby.

“I can’t credit it. ’Appened so quick, sir.”

Cries went up. “Fire!” and “Murder!”

“You better take us in,” said Charles.

“Not the lady—beggin’ your pardon, ma’am—it’s too ’orrible.”

“She’ll be fine,” said Charles, winning her all over again—though the casual assumption of the strength of her constitution in face of the truly ’orrible gave her some pause. “Come on, quick about it!”

Blenkins led them back toward the Gift.

5. “THE SCENE OF THE OCCURRENCE”

THERE WAS A rumble, deep in the ground, like the awakening of an angry ogre. The doors of the Gift were thrown open, and people—some in costume—poured through. Bulge, collar burst and a bruise on his forehead, was carried out by a broken-winged fairy and a soot-grimed engineer.

Charles held Kate’s arm, holding her back.

Bulge caught sight of her and glared as if she were personally to blame.

Blenkins took off his cap and covered his face with it.

Something big broke, deep inside the Gift. Cries and screams were all around.

Quinn, beard awry and hat gone, staggered into the evening light, dazed.

The elves stumbled into an encircling crowd of curious spectators. Kate realized she was in danger of belonging to this category of nuisance.

A belch of smoke escaped and rose in a black ring.

The doors clattered shut.

Breaths were held. There was a moment of quiet. No more smoke, no flames or explosions. Then, everyone began talking at once.

The police were on the scene, a troop of uniformed constables throwing up a picket around the Gift. Kate recognized Inspector Mist of Scotland Yard, a sallow man with a pendulous mustache.

Mist caught sight of Charles and Kate. He shifted his bowler to the back of his head.

“Again we meet in unusual circumstances, Inspector,” said Charles.

“Unusual circumstances are an expected thing with you, Mr. Beauregard,” said the policeman. “I suppose you two’ll have the authority of a certain body to act as, shall we say, observers in this investigation.”

Charles did not confirm or deny this, a passive sort of mendacity. She had a pang of worry. Her friend stood to lose a hard-to-define position. She had dark ideas of what form expulsion from the Diogenes Club might take.

“We’re not sure any crime has been committed,” she said, distracting the thoughtful Mist. “It might be some kind of accident.”

“There is usually a crime somewhere, Miss Reed.”

Mist might look the glum plodder, but was one of the sharpest needles in the box.

“Hullo, Quinn,” said the Inspector, spotting the publicist. “Not hawking patent medicines again, are we?”

Quinn looked sheepish and shook his head.

“I’m relieved to hear it. I trust you’ve found respectable employment.” The former leprechaun was pale and shaking. His green jacket was spotted with red.

Mist ordered his men to disperse only the irrelevant crowds. He told the elves not to melt into the throng just yet. Questions would have to be answered. More policemen arrived, then a clanking, hissing fire engine. Mist had the Brigade stand by.

“Let’s take a look inside this pixie pavilion, shall we?”

Quinn shook his head, insistently.

Mist pulled one of the book covers open, and stepped inside.

No one from Bulge's troupe was eager to join him. Blenkins hid behind Miss Fay, whose wand was snapped and leotards laddered. Kate followed the inspector, with Charles in her wake. In the murk of the tunnel, Mist was exasperated. He pushed the main door back open.

"Who's in charge?" he called out.

Some elves moved away from Uncle Satt, who was fiddling with his collar, trying to refasten it despite the loss of a stud.

"Mr. Bulge, if you would be so kind . . ."

The inspector beckoned. Bulge advanced, regaining some of his composure.

"Thank you, sir."

Bulge entered his realm, joining the little party.

"If you would lead us to the scene of the occurrence . . ."

Bulge, even in the shadows, blanched visibly.

"Very well," he said, lifting a flap of black velvet. A stairwell wound into the ground. Smell hung in the air, ozone and machine oil and something else foul. Arrhythmic din boomed from below. Kate felt a touch of the quease.

Mist went first, signaling for Bulge to follow. Kate and Charles waited for them to disappear before setting foot on the wrought iron steps.

"Into the underworld," said Charles.

"I didn't realize Noggart's Nook harbored circles of damned souls."

"Children who don't wash their hands before *and* after meals, maids who sweep dust under the carpets . . ."

Beneath the Gift were large stone-walled rooms, hot and damp. Electric lamps flickered in heavily grilled alcoves.

"Good god," exclaimed Inspector Mist.

The dynamos were still in motion, though slowed and erratic. Huge cast-iron engines, set in concrete foundations, spat sparks and water droplets as great belts kept the drums in motion. Wheels and pistons whirled and pounded, ball valves spun, and

somewhere below a hungry furnace roared. The central dynamo was grinding irregularly, works impeded by a limp suit of clothes filled with loose meat.

Kate gasped and covered her mouth and nose with her hand, determined not to be overcome.

Flopping from the suit collar was a deflated ball with a bloody smear for a face.

"Sackham," cried Bulge.

She could not recognize this rag as the clerkish elf she had seen earlier, scurrying after his master.

"What's been done to you?!" howled Bulge, with a shocking, undeniable grief.

The human tangle was twisted into the wheels of the machine, boneless legs caught in cogs. A ball valve whined to a halt and shook off its spindle. With a mighty straining and gouts of fire, the central dynamo died. Its fellows flipped over inhibitors and shut down in more orderly fashion. The lamps faded.

In the dark there was only the *stench*.

Kate felt Charles's arm around her.

ACT III: FÆRIE

1. "EVENTS HAVE EVENTUATED"

AFTER A DAY as Sir Boris and a night at a police station, Charles needed to sleep. The situation was escalating, but he was no use in his present state. He had told Inspector Mist as much as he could and done his best to spare Kate further distress.

He was greeted at the door of his house in Cheyne Walk.

"Visitors, sir," said his man, Bairstow. "I have them in the reception room. Funereal gentlemen."

He considered himself in the hall mirror. Unshaven, the gray

Kate—clever girl!—had deftly intuited was evident about his gills.

These visitors would not care about his appearance.

"Send in tea, Bairstow. Strong and green."

"Very good, sir."

Charles stepped into his reception room, as if he were the intruder and the others at home.

The two men were dressed like undertakers, in long black coats and gloves, crepe-brimmed hats, and smoked glasses.

"Beauregard," said the senior, Mr. Hay.

"Gentlemen," he acknowledged.

Mr. Hay took his ease in the best armchair, looking over the latest number of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, open to an article by Kate. Not a coincidence.

Mr. Effe, younger and leaner, stood by a bookcase, reading spines. Charles, not caring to be treated like a schoolboy summoned before the beak for a thrashing, slipped into a chair of his own and stretched out, fingers interlaced on his waistcoat as if settling down for a nap.

(Which would be a good idea.)

Two sets of hidden eyes fixed on him.

"Must you wear those things?" Charles asked.

Mr. Hay lowered his spectacles, disclosing very light-colored, surprisingly humorous eyes. Mr. Effe did not follow suit. Charles amused himself by imagining a severe case of the cross-eyed squints.

At this hour in the morning, a maid would have opened the curtains. The visitors had drawn them again, which should make protective goggles superfluous. He wondered what his visitors could actually see. It was no wonder Mr. Effe had to get so close to the shelves to identify books.

"The salacious items are under lock and key in the hidden room," said Charles. "Have you read *My Nine Nights in a Harem*? I've a rare *Vermis Mysteriis*, illustrated with brass rubbings that'd curl your hair."

“That’s a giggle,” snarled Mr. Effe. “Of course, you *do* have hidden rooms.”

“Three. And secret passages. Don’t you?”

He couldn’t imagine Mr. Hay or Mr. Effe—or any of their fellows, Mr. Bee, Mr. Sea, and Mr. Dee, all the way to Mr. Eggs, Miss Why, and Mr. Zee—*having* homes, even haunted lairs. He assumed they slept in rows of coffins under the Houses of Parliament.

Mr. Effe wiped a line down a mediocre edition of *The Collected Poems of Jeffrey Aspern* and pretended to find dust on his gloved finger.

Charles knew Mrs. Hammond, his housekeeper, better than that.

“You’ve been acting on your own initiative,” said Mr. Hay. “That’s out of character for an active member of the Diogenes Club. Not that there are enough of you to make general assumptions. Sedentary bunch, as a rule.”

“Did you think we wouldn’t notice?” sniped Mr. Effe.

Mr. Hay raised a hand, silencing his junior.

“We’re not here for recriminations.”

Millie, the second-prettiest maid, brought in the tray. He approved; Lucy, the household stunner, was in reserve for special occasions. After thanking the by-no-means unappealing Millie, he let her escape. Mr. Effe’s attempt at a charming smile had thrown a fright into the girl. Charles poured a measure of Mrs. Hammond’s potent brew into a giant’s teacup, but did not offer hospitality.

“Events have eventuated,” said Mr. Hay. “Your Ruling Cabal was shortsighted to green-ribbon the Harvill children. You, however, were perceptive in continuing to take an interest. Even if *unsanctioned*.”

“Bad business under Regent’s Park,” commented Mr. Effe.

Charles expected these fellows to be up on things.

“Your assumption is that this is the same case?” asked Mr. Hay.

He swallowed tea. The Undertaking knew full well this was the same case.

"Mr. Effe, if you would do the honors," said Mr. Hay, snapping his fingers.

Mr. Effe unbuttoned his coat down the front, and reached inside. Charles tensed, ready to defend his corner.

Mr. Effe produced a pinch of material, which he unraveled and let dangle. A pale-green ribbon.

"Removed from the Harvill file," said Mr. Hay. "With the full cooperation and consultation of the Ruling Cabal."

"You're official again, pally," snapped Mr. Effe.

Charles relaxed. He would have to make explanation to the Cabal in time, but was protected now by approval from on high (rather, down below). There was a literal dark side to this. For all its stuffiness and eccentricities, he understood the Diogenes Club: it was a comfort and shelter in a world of shadows. The Undertaking was constituted on different lines. Rivalry between the Club and the men in smoked glasses held a potential for outright conflict. It had been said of Mycroft Holmes, chairman of the Ruling Cabal, that sometimes he *was* the British government; the troubling thing about the Undertaking was that sometimes it *wasn't*.

"We'll see your report," said Mr. Hay.

He remembered how tired he was. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was alone.

Something tickled on his face. He puffed it away, and saw it was the ribbon.

2. "THRONES, POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES"

KATE'S STORY DOMINATED the front page of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. An affront to a national treasure (for so Uncle Satt was reckoned), a gruesomely mysterious death, and rumors of supernatural agency

meant Harry Cust had no choice but to give her piece prominence. However, it was rewritten so ruthlessly, by Cust himself at the typesetting bench, that she felt reduced to the status of interviewee, providing raw material shaped into journalism by other hands.

She was cheered, slightly, by a telegram of approval from Uncle Diarmid, who *ought* to be reckoned a national treasure. It arrived soon after the midmorning special was hawked in the streets, addressed not to the *Gazette* offices but the Cheshire Cheese, the Fleet Street watering hole where Kate, and four-fifths of the journalists in London, took most meals. Uncle Diarmid always said half the trick of newspaper reporting was getting underfoot, contriving to be present at the most "newsworthy" incidents, gumming up the works to get the story.

The image conjured unpleasant memories. She had ordered chops, but wasn't sure she could face eating—though hunger pangs had struck several times through the long night and morning.

Reporters from other papers stopped by her table, offering congratulations but also soliciting unrefined nuggets of information. Anything about Satterthwaite Bulge was news. Back files were being combed to provide follow-up pieces to fill out this afternoon and evening editions. The assumption was that the notoriously close-mouthed Inspector Mist would not oblige with further revelations about the death of Mr. Leslie Sackham in time to catch the presses.

Kate had little to add.

The story about the goblins was out, and sketches already circulated ("artist's impressions," which is to say unsubstantiated, fantastical lies) depicting malicious, oval-headed imps tormenting Mr. Sackham before tossing him to the dynamo. Most of Uncle Satt's elves had come forth with tales of goblin sightings or encounters in the dark. Blenkins was charging upward of ten shillings a time for an anecdote. The rumor was that Scotland Yard

was looking for dwarves. Jack Stump was in hiding. Kate wondered about other little people—like Master Timothy, the obnoxious child. How far could such a prankster go? Surely, nursery ill manners did not betoken a heart black enough for murder. It made more sense to look for goblins. The sensation press had already turned up distinguished crackpots willing to expound at length about the vile habits of genus *Goblinus*. Soon, there would be organized hunting parties, and rattail bounties offered on green, pointed ears.

Kate's chops were set before her. She had ordered them well cooked, so that no red showed. Even so, she ate the baked potato first.

There was the problem of Mr. Sackham's obituary, which was assigned to her. The most interesting thing about the man's life was its end, already described at quite enough length. His injuries were such that it was impossible to tell whether he had been thrown (or fallen) alive into the dynamo. Indeed, the corpse was mutilated to such an extent that if the incident were encountered in a penny dreadful, the astute reader would assume Mr. Sackham not to be dead at all but that the body was a nameless tramp dressed in his clothes and sacrificed in order to facilitate a surprise in a later chapter. The second most interesting thing about Sackham was that he had penned many of the words recently published under the byline of Uncle Satt, but Cust forbade her to mention this. Exposing hypocrites was all very well, but no newspaper could afford to suggest that Satterthwaite Bulge was less than the genial "Founder of Færie and Magister of Marvells" for fear of an angry mob of children invading their offices to wreak vengeful havoc. She was reduced to padding out a paragraph on Sackham's duties at the Gift and the fact that he very nearly could legitimately call Uncle Satt his uncle; Leslie Sackham had been the son of his employer's cousin.

She finished her copy and her chops at about the same time, then gave a handy lad tuppence to rush the obit to the *Gazette* in

the Strand. As Ned made his way out of the Cheese, he was entrusted with a dozen other scribblings—some on the reverse of bills, most on leaves torn from notebooks—to drop off at the various newspapers on his route.

Now, she might snatch a snooze.

"Kate."

She looked up, not sure how long (or if) she had dozed in her chair.

"Charles."

He sat down.

"Scotland Yard is saying it was an accident," he said.

Kate sensed journalistic ears pricking up all around.

"That doesn't sound like Mist," she observed.

"I didn't say 'Mist,' I said 'Scotland Yard.'"

She understood. Decisions had been made in shadowed corridors.

"The Gift is declared 'unsafe' for the moment," he continued. "No grand opening this weekend, I'm afraid. There'll be investigations, by the public health and safety people and anyone else who can get his oar in. It turns out that the Corporation of London still owns the site. Uncle Satt is lessee of the ground, though he has deed and title to all structures built on and under it. There'll be undignified arguments over whose fault it all is. In the meantime, the place is under police guard. As you can imagine, Regent's Park is besieged by aspirant goblin-hunters. Some have butterfly nets and elephant guns."

She looked around. The cartoonist responsible was lurking somewhere.

"I was given this," he said, producing a length of green ribbon.

"The Ruling Cabal wants you to continue to take an interest?"

"They've no choice. Another body has made its desires known. There are thrones, powers, and principalities in this. For some reason beyond me, this matter is important. My remit is loose. While the police and the safety fellows are concerned with

Sackham's death, I am to pull the loose ends. I have leeway as to whom I choose to involve, and I should like to choose you."

"*Again?* You'll have to put me up for membership one day."

She was teasing, but he took it seriously. "In a world of impossibilities, that should be discussed. I shall see what I can do."

Previously, when Charles involved her (or, more properly, allowed her to become involved) in the business of the Diogenes Club, she had gathered stories that would make her name if set in type but that wouldn't even pass the breed of editor willing to publish "artist's impressions," let alone Henry Cockayne-Cust. Still, she had an eternal itch to draw back the curtain. Association with Charles was interesting on other levels, if often enervating or perilous.

"If the Gift is being adequately investigated, where should we direct our attentions?"

Charles smiled.

"How would you like an audience with B. Loved?"

3. "THE AFFAIR OF THE DENDRIFIED DIGIT"

"SO THIS IS the house that Færie built?" said Kate.

"Bought," he corrected.

"Very nice. Pennies add up like details, indeed."

They were on a doorstep in elegant Broadley Terrace, quite near Regent's Park and a long way from Herefordshire.

"What's that smell?" asked Kate, nose wrinkling like a kitten's.

"Fresh bread," he told her.

The door was opened by a child with flour on his cheeks and a magnifying glass in his hand. The boy examined Charles's shoes and trouser cuffs, then angled his gaze upward. Through the lens, half his face was enlarged and distorted.

"I be a 'tective," he announced.

"What about the flour?" asked Charles.

Kate had slipped a handkerchief out of her tightly buttoned cuff, possessed of a universal feminine instinct to clean the faces of boys who were perfectly happy as they were.

The boy touched his forehead, then examined the white on his fingertips.

"I be a baker too, like my da. I be baker by day, 'tective by night."

"Very practical," said Kate. "In my experience, detectives often neglect proper meals."

"Are you a 'tective too, mister?"

Charles looked at Kate, for a prompt.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "But don't tell anyone. Affairs of state, you know."

The boy's face distorted in awe.

"A *secret agent* . . . . Come in and have some of my boasters. I made them special, all by myself. Though Da helped with the oven."

Charles let Kate step into the hallway and followed, removing his hat.

A woman bustled into the hall.

"Dickie," she said, incipiently scolding, "who've you let in now?"

The woman, neat and plump, came to them. Sairey Riddle, well shy of thirty, had gray streaks. In eight years, she had filled out to resemble her late mother.

She remembered him.

"It's you," she said, face shaded. "You found *her*."

"Maeve."

"Her."

He understood the distinction.

"This is my friend, Miss Katharine Reed. Kate, this is Sairey Riddle."

"Sarah," she said, careful with the syllables now.

Dickie was clinging to his mother's skirts. Now, he looked up

again at Charles.

"You be *that* 'tective. Who found Auntie when she were lost? In the olden days?"

"He means before he were . . . was born. It's all olden days to him. Might as well a' been knights in armor and fire-breathing dragons."

"Yes, Dickie. I found your Aunt Maeve. One of my most difficult cases." Dickie looked through his magnifying glass again.

"A proper *'tective*," he breathed.

"I do believe you've found a hero-worshipper," whispered Kate, not entirely satirically.

Charles was intently aware of a sudden responsibility.

"Don't mind our Dickie," said Sarah. "He's not daft and he means well."

For the first time in months, Charles felt the ache in his forearm, in the long-healed bite. It was the name, of course. By now, his son would have been almost an adult; he would have been Dickie as a child, Dick as a youth, and be on the point of demanding the full, respectful Richard.

"Are you all right?" inquired Kate, sharp as usual.

"Old wound," he said, not satisfying her.

"Have you come about the business in the park?" prompted Sarah. "We heard about poor Mr. Sackham."

"I'm afraid so. We were wondering if we might see Davey?"

Sarah bit her lower lip. He noticed a worn spot, often chewed. She glanced up at the ceiling. The shadow that had fallen over this family in Hill Wood had never been dispelled.

"It's not been one of his good days."

"I can imagine."

"We never did find out, you know, what *happened* to him. To them both."

"I know."

Sarah led them into a reception room. She left Dickie with them while she went to look in on her brother.

“Do you want to see my *clues*?” asked the boy, tugging Charles’s trouser pocket.

Kate found this hilarious but stifled her giggles.

Dickie produced a cigar box and showed its contents.

“This button ’nabled me to solve the Case of the Vanishing Currant Bun. It were the fat lad from down the road. He snitched it from the tray when Da weren’t looking. This playin’ card, a jack of hearts with one corner bent off, is the key to the Scandal of the Cheatin’ Governess. And this twig that looks ’zactly like a ’uman finger is a mystery whose solution no man yet knows, though I’ve not ’bandoned my inquiries.”

Charles examined the twig, which did resemble a finger.

“What do you call the case?” he asked the boy.

“It hasn’t a name yet.”

“What about the Affair of the Dendrified Digit?” suggested Kate.

Dickie’s eyes widened and he ran the words around his mouth.

“What be a ‘dendrified digit’?”

“A finger turned to wood.”

“Very ’propriate. Are you a ’tective too, lady?”

“I’m a reporter.”

“A *daredevil* reporter,” Charles corrected.

Kate poked her tongue out at him while Dickie wasn’t looking.

“Then you must be a ’tective’s *assistant*.”

Kate was struck aghast. It was Charles’s turn to be amused.

Dickie reached into his box and produced a rusty nail.

“This be . . .”

He halted midsentence, swallowed, and stepped back, positioning himself so that Kate stood between the door and him.

The handle was turning.

Into the room came a little girl in blue, as perfectly dressed as a china doll on display. She had an enormous cloud of stiff blond hair and a long, solemn, pretty face.

Beside her, Dickie looked distinctly shabby.

The girl looked at Charles and announced, “We have met before.”

“It’s Auntie,” whispered Dickie. Charles saw the wariness the lad had around the girl; not fear, exactly, but an understanding, developed over years, that she could hurt him if she chose.

“Maeve,” Charles said. “I am Mr. Beauregard.”

“The man in the wood,” she said. “The hero of the day. *That* day.”

Kate’s mouth was open. At a glance from Charles, she realized her lapse and shut it quickly. Dickie wasn’t quite hiding behind Kate’s skirt, but was in a position to make that retreat if needed.

Maeve wandered around the room, picking up ornaments, looking at them and putting them down in exactly the same place. She didn’t look directly at Charles or Kate, but always had a reflective surface in sight to observe their faces.

Instinctively, Charles wanted to know where she was at any moment.

If Dickie were seven or eight, Maeve should be nineteen or twenty. She was exactly as she had been when he first saw her, in Hill Wood.

“I thought you’d be taller,” said Kate.

The girl arched a thick eyebrow, as if she hadn’t noticed Kate before.

“Might you be *Mrs.* Beauregard?”

“Katharine Reed, *Pall Mall Gazette*,” she said.

“Is it *common* for ladies to represent newspapers?”

“Not at all.”

“Oh, really? I rather thought it was. Most *common*.”

She turned, as if dismissing a servant.

Maeve Harvill did not act like a carpenter’s daughter or a baker’s niece. She was a princess. Not an especially nice one.

“You’ll have come to see poor David.”

“Poor” David owned this house and was the support of his whole family. Charles wondered if Davey even knew that.

“About the unpleasantness in the park.”

“You know about that?”

“It was in the *newspapers*,” she said, tossing a glance at Kate.

“Do you know Mr. Satterthwaite Bulge? He’s *ghastly*.”

That was the first child-thing she had said.

“Does Uncle Satt call here often?” asked Kate.

“He’s not *my* uncle. He stays away unless he absolutely can’t help it. Will he go to jail? I’m sure what happened to Leslie is all his fault.”

“You knew the late Mr. Sackham?” Charles asked.

Maeve considered Kate and then Charles, thinking. She pressed an eyetooth to her lower lip, carefully not breaking the skin, mimicking Sarah—whom it was hard to think of as the princess’s sister.

“Is this to be an *interrogation*?”

“They be ’tectives, Auntie,” said Dickie.

“How exciting,” she commented, as if on the point of falling asleep. “Are we to be arrested?”

She held out her arms, voluminous sleeves sliding away from bird-thin wrists.

“Do you have handcuffs in my size?”

She spied something on a small table. It was Dickie’s twig clue. She picked it up, held it alongside her own forefinger, and snapped it in half.

“Dirty thing. I can’t imagine how it got in here.”

Dickie didn’t cry, but one of his eyes gleamed with a tear-to-be.

Maeve made a fist around the twig fragments as if to crush them further, then opened her hand to show an empty palm. With a flourish she produced the twig—whole—in her other hand.

Kate clapped, slowly. Maeve smiled to herself and took a little bow.

“I be a ’tective,” said Dickie, tears gone and delight stamped on his face. “Auntie Maeve be a *conjurer*.”

“She should go on the halls,” said Kate, unimpressed. “Mystic,

Magical Maeve, the Modern Medusa."

The girl flicked the twig into a grate where no fire would burn till autumn. Neither of her hands was dirty, the neatest trick of all.

"She makes things vanish, then brings 'em back," said Dickie.

"That seems to happen quite often in this family," commented Charles.

"More things vanish than come back," said Maeve. "Has he told you about the Bun Bandit from two doors down?"

"A successful conclusion to a baffling case?"

Maeve smiled. "Sidney Silcock might not think so. He was thrashed and put on bread and water. Dickie has to keep out of the way when Sidney pays a call. A retaliatory walloping has been mentioned. There's a fellow who knows how to bide his time. I shouldn't be surprised if he waits *years*, until everyone else has forgotten what it was about. But the walloping will be *heroic*. Sidney is one to do things on an heroic scale."

"He sounds a desperate villain."

"He's desperate all right," said Maeve, smiling her secret smile again.

"Greedy Sid's sweet on 'er," said Dickie.

She glared calmly at her nephew.

Sarah came into the room, took in the scene, and nipped her lip again.

"Sarah, dear, I have been renewing a friendship. This, I am sure you realize, is Charles Beauregard, the intrepid fellow who rescued me from the *gypsies in the wood*."

"Yes, Maeve, I realize."

Sarah was not unconditionally grateful for this rescue. Sometimes she wished Charles had left well enough alone, had not lifted the princess from the snow, not carried her out of the wood.

"Davey says he'd like to see you," Sarah told Charles, quietly—like a servant in her mistress's presence. "And the lady."

"You are privileged," said Maeve. "My brother rarely likes to see me."

She was playing with a glass globe that contained a miniature woodland scene. When shook, it made a blizzard.

"Happy memories," she commented.

"Davey's upstairs, in his studio," said Sarah.

"Drawing. He's better than he was earlier."

Sarah held the door open. Kate stepped into the hall, and Charles followed. Sarah looked back, at her son and her sister.

"Dickie, come help in the kitchen," she said.

Dickie stayed where he was.

"I can see he stays out of trouble while we have visitors," said Maeve.

"I've been practicing new tricks."

Sarah was unsure. Dickie was resigned.

"I be all right, Ma."

Sarah nodded and closed the door on the children. A tear of blood ran down the groove of her chin, unnoticed.

"Maeve hasn't changed," said Charles as Sarah led them upstairs.

"Not since you saw her," she responded. "But she *did* change. When she were away. As much as Davey, not that anyone do listen to I. Not that Mam listened, God rest her."

From the landing, Charles looked downstairs. All was quiet.

"Come through here," said Sarah. "To the studio."

4. "INDUSTRY IS A VIRTUE"

KATE WAS EXPECTING Ben Gunn—wild hair, matted beard, mad eyes. Instead, she found a presentable man, working in a room full of light. Beard he had, but neatly trimmed and free of beetles. One eye was slightly lazy, but he did not seem demented. Davey Harvill, B. Loved, sat on a stool, over paper pinned flat to a bench. His hand moved fast with a sharp pencil, filling in intricate details of a picture already sketched. To one side was a neat pile of

papers, squared away like letters for posting. By his feet was a half-full wastepaper basket.

This was the neatest artist's studio she had ever seen: bare floorboards spotless, walls papered but unadorned. Uncurtained floor-to-ceiling windows admitted direct sunlight. The expected clutter was absent: no books, reference materials, divans for models, props. Davey, in shirtsleeves, had not so much as a smudge of graphite upon him. He might have been a draper's clerk doing the end-of-day accounts. It was as if the pictures were willed into being without effort, without mess. They came out of his head, whole and entire, and were transmitted to paper.

Mrs. Riddle let Kate and Charles into the room, coughed discreetly, and withdrew.

Davey looked up, nodded to Charles and smiled at Kate. His hand moved at hummingbird speed, whether his eye was upon the paper or not. Some mediums practiced automatic writing; this could be automatic drawing.

"Charles, hello," said Davey.

As far as Kate knew, the artist had not seen Charles in eight years.

"How have you been?" asked Charles.

"Very well, sir, all things considered."

He finished his drawing and, without looking, freed it from its pinnings and shifted it to the pile, neatening the corners. He unrolled paper from a scroll, deftly pinned it in place, and used a penknife to cut neatly across the top. A white, empty expanse lay before him.

"Busy, of course," he said. "Industry is a virtue."

He took a pencil and, without pause, began to sketch.

Kate moved closer, to get a look at the work in progress. Most painters would have thrown her in the street for such impertinence, but Davey did not appear to mind.

Davey's pencil point flew, in jagged, sudden strokes. A woodland appeared, populated by creatures whose eyes showed in

shadows. Two small figures, hand in hand, walked in a clearing. A little boy and a girl. Watched from the trees and the burrows.

"This is my friend Kate Reed," said Charles.

Davey smiled again, open and engaging, content in his work.

"Hello, Kate."

"Please forgive this intrusion," she ventured.

"It's no trouble. Makes a nice change."

His pencil left the children, and darted to the corners of the picture, shading areas with solid strokes that left black shadows, relieved by tiny, glittering eyes and teeth. Kate was alarmed, afraid for the safety of the boy and the girl.

"I still haven't remembered anything," said Davey. "I'm sorry, Charles. I have tried."

"That's all right, Davey."

He was back on the central figures. The children, alone in the woods, clinging together for reassurance, for safety.

"What subject is this?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Davey, looking down, seeing the picture for the first time, "the usual."

Now his eyes were on the paper, Davey stopped drawing.

"*Babes in the Wood*?" suggested Charles. "Hansel and Gretel?"

Something was wrong about the children. They did not fit either of the stories Charles had mentioned.

"Davey and Maeve," said the artist, sadly. "I know everything I draw comes from *that time*. It's as if it never ended, not really."

Charles laid a hand on the man's—the boy's—shoulder.

Davey began to work again on the children, more deliberately now.

Kate saw what was wrong. The girl was not afraid.

As Davey was doing the girl's eyes, the pencil lead broke, scratching across her face.

"Pity," he said.

Rather than reach for an india rubber and make a minor change, he tore the paper from the block and began to make a ball

of it.

"Excuse me," said Kate, taking the picture from its creator.

"It's no use," he said.

Kate spread the crumpled paper.

She saw something in it.

Charles riffled through the pile of completed illustrations. They were a sequence. The children entering the woods, taking a winding path, walking past færie dwellings without noticing, enticed ever deeper into the dark.

Kate looked back at the rejected picture.

The girl was exactly the child-woman Kate had met downstairs, Maeve. Her brother had caught the sulky, adult turn of her mouth and made her huge brush of hair seem alive. A princess, but a frightening one.

In the picture, the children were not lost. The girl was *leading* the boy into the woods.

"This is your sister," said Kate, tapping the girl's scratched face.

"Maeve," he said, not quite agreeing.

"And this is you? Davey?"

Davey hesitated. "That's not right," he said. "Let me fix it . . ."

He reached for his pencil, but Charles stayed his hand.

They all looked closely at the boy in the picture. He was just beginning to worry, starting to consider unthinkable things—that the girl who held his hand was, in a real sense, a stranger to him, a stranger to *everyone*, that this adventure in the woods was taking a sinister turn.

It *might* be Davey, as he was when he went into the woods eight years ago, as a nine-year-old.

But it looked more like Dickie, as he was now.

5. "RICHARD RIDDLE, SPECIAL DETECTIVE"

"IF *I* WERE a real detective," said Auntie Maeve, "I shouldn't be

content to waste my talents tracking down bun thieves. For my quarry, I should choose more desperate criminals. Fiends who threaten the country more than they do their own trouser buttons."

Dickie trailed down the street after his aunt.

"I should concentrate exclusively on cases which constitute a challenge, on mysteries *worth* solving. Murders, and such."

Maeve led him past the Silcock house, which gave him a pang of worry. Greedy Sid was, like the Count of Monte Cristo, capable of nurturing over long years an impulse to revenge. Behind the tall railings, bottom still smarting, the miscreant would be brooding, plotting. Dickie imagined Sidney Silcock, swollen to enormous size, become his lifelong nemesis, the Napoleon of Gluttony.

"The mystery of Leslie Sackham, for instance."

The name caught Dickie's mind.

He remembered Mr. Sackham as a bendy minion, hair floppy and cuffs ink stained, trailing after Mr. Bulge in attitudes of contortion. A tall man, he tried always to look up to his employer, no matter what kinks that put into his neck and spine. Sometimes, Mr. Sackham told stories to children, but got them muddled and lost his audience before he reached the predictable endings. Dickie remembered one about Miss Fay Twinkledust, who put all her sparkles into a sensible investment portfolio rather than tossing them into the Silver Stream to be gobbled by the Silly Fish. Mr. Sackham had been a boring grown-up. Now he was dead, the limits of his bendiness reached inside the works of a dynamo; Dickie felt guilty for not having liked him much.

It would be fitting if he were to solve the mystery.

Everyone would be grateful. Especially if it meant the Gift could open after all. Mr. Bulge's business would be saved from the Silly Fish. Dickie understood the fortunes of the Harvill household depended in some mysterious way on the enterprises of "Uncle Satt"—though only babies and girls read that dreary *Treasury* for anything but Uncle Davey's pictures.

Maeve took his hand.

"Where are we goin'?"

"To the park, of course."

"Why?"

"To look for *clues*."

At this magic word, Dickie was seized by the *rightness* of the pursuit. Whatever else Maeve might be, she was clever. She would make a valuable detective's assistant, with her sharp eyes and odd way of looking at things. Sometimes, she frightened people. That could be useful too.

Though it was too warm out for caps, scarves, and coats, Maeve had insisted they dress properly for this sleuthing expedition. They might have to go *underground*, she said.

Dickie wore his special coat, a "reversible" that could be either a loud check or a subdued herringbone. If spotted by a suspected criminal one was "tailing," the trick was to turn the coat inside out and so seem to be another boy entirely. He even had a matching cap. In addition, secret pockets were stuffed with the instruments of his calling. About his person, he had the magnifying glass, measuring calipers, his catapult (which he was under strict orders from Ma not to use within shot of windows), a map of the locality with secret routes penciled in, a multipurpose penknife (with five blades, plus corkscrew, screwdriver, and bradawl) and a bottle of invisible ink. He had made up cards for himself using a potato press, in visible and invisible ink: RICHARD RIDDLE, SPECIAL DETECTIVE. Da approved, saying he was "a regular Hawkshaw." Hawkshaw was a famous detective from the olden days.

Maeve, with a blue bonnet that matched her dress, was a touch conspicuous for "undercover" work. She walked with such confidence, however, that no one thought they were out on their own. Seeing the children—not that Aunt Maeve was *exactly* a child—in the street, people assumed there was a governess nearby, watching over them.

Dickie didn't believe in governesses. They came and went so

often. Ma lamented that most found it difficult to work under a baker's wife, which proved the stupidity of the breed. He might bristle at parental decrees, especially with regards to the overrated virtues of cleanliness and tidiness, but Ma knew best—better than a governess, at any rate. Some were unaccountably prone to fits of terror. He suspected Maeve worked tricks to make governesses vanish on a regular basis, though she never brought them back again. He even wondered whether his aunt hadn't had an unseen hand in one of his greatest triumphs, the Mystery of the Cheating Governess. Despite overwhelming evidence, Miss MacAndrew had maintained to the moment of her dismissal that she had done no such thing.

In the park, children were everywhere, playing hopscotch, climbing anything that could be climbed, defending the North-West Frontier against disapproving wardens, fighting wild Red Indians with Buffalo Bill. Governesses in black bombazine flocked on the benches. Dickie imagined a cloud of general disapproval gathering above them. He pondered the possibility that they were in a secret society, pledged to make miserable the lives of all children, sworn to inflict *etiquette* and *washes* on the innocent. They dressed alike, and had the same expression—as if they'd just been made to swallow a whole lemon but ordered not to let it show.

He shouldn't be at all surprised if governesses were behind the Mystery of the Mangled Minion.

Mr. Sackham had died in the park. There were always governesses in the park. They could easily cover up for each other. In their black, they could blend in with the shadows.

He liked the theory. Hawkshaw would have found it sound.

A pretty child with gloves in the shape of rabbit heads approached, smiling slyly. She had ribbons in her hair and sewn to her clothes. She was overdecorated, as if awarded a fresh ribbon every time she said her prayers.

"Little boy, my name is Becky d'Arbanvilliers," said the girl,

who was younger than him by a year or more. “When I gwow up and Papa cwoaks, I shall be *Lady* d’Arbanvilliers. If you do something for me, I’ll let you kiss my wabbits.”

Maeve took the future Lady d’Arbanvilliers aside, lifted a curtain of ribbons, and whispered into her ear. Maeve was insistent but calm. The girl’s face crumpled, eyes expanding. Maeve finished whispering and stood back. Becky d’Arbanvilliers looked up at her, trembling. Maeve nodded and the girl ran away, exploding into screams and floods of tears.

“Hey presto, Hawkshaw,” she told Dickie. “Magic.”

Becky d’Arbanvilliers fled to the coven of governesses, too hysterical to explain, but pointing in the direction where Maeve had been.

An odd thing was that two men dressed like governesses, not in long skirts but all in black with dark spectacles and curly hat brims, were nearby. Dickie pegged them as sinister individuals. *They* paid attention to the noisy little girl.

“How cwuel,” said Maeve, imitating perfectly. “To be named ‘Rebecca’ and yet pweveneted by nature fwom pwonouncing it pwoperly.”

Dickie laughed. No one else noticed his aunt could be funny as well as frightening. It was a secret between them.

Maeve led him toward the Gift.

A barrier of trestles was set up all around the building, hung with notices warning the public not to trespass. A policeman stood by the front doors, firmly seeing away curiosity seekers. Dickie and Maeve had visited while Uncle Davey was helping Mr. Bulge turn the Gift into the Færie Aerie, and knew other ways in and out. Special Detectives always had more information than the poor plods of the Yard.

Maeve led Dickie round to the rear of the Gift. A door there supposedly only opened from the inside, so the used-up visitors could leave to make room for fresh ones. Unless you knew it was there, you wouldn’t see it. The wall was painted with a big color

copy of one of Uncle Davey's drawings, and the door hid in a waterfall, like goblins in a puzzle.

They slipped under an unguarded trestle.

Commotion rose in the park, among governesses. Becky d'Arbanvilliers had been able to explain. Though the governess instinct was to distrust anything a child told them, *something* had upset the girl. A hunt would have to be organized.

The men dressed like governesses took an interest.

Dickie was worried for his aunt.

Maeve smiled at him.

"I shall spirit us to safety, with more magic," she announced. "Might I borrow your catapult?"

He was reluctant to hand over such a formidable weapon.

"I shall return it directly."

Dickie undid his secret pocket and produced the catapult.

Maeve examined it, twanged the rubber appreciatively, and pronounced it a fine addition to a detective's arsenal.

She made a fold in the rubber and slipped it into the crack in the falling waters that showed those who knew what to look for where the door was. She worked with her fingers for a few moments.

"This is where a conjurer chats to the audience, to take their minds off the trick being done in front of their eyes."

Dickie watched closely—he always did, but Maeve still managed tricks he could not work out.

"I say, what are you children doing?"

It was a *governess*, a skeleton in black. "Have you seen a horrid, *horrid* little girl . . . ? Dipped in the very essence of wickedness?"

Maeve did one of her best tricks. She put on a smile that fooled everyone but Dickie. She seemed like all the sunny girls in the world, brainless and cheerful.

"I should not like to meet a wicked little girl," she said, sounding a little like Becky d'Arbanvilliers. "No, thank you very much."

"Very wise," said the governess, fooled entirely. "Well, if you see such a creature, stay well away from her."

The woman stalked off.

Maeve shrugged and dropped the smile.

"I swear, Hawkshaw, these *people*. They're so *stupid*. They deserve . . . ah!"

There was a click inside the wall. Maeve pulled the catapult free and the door came open.

She handed him back the catapult and tugged him inside, into the dark.

The door shut behind them.

"This is an adventure, isn't it?"

He agreed.

6. "INTELLIGENCE REPORTS"

SARAH RIDDLE, OVER the first shock, slumped on a hall settee, numb and cried out.

Charles understood.

The worst thing was that this was a *familiar* anxiety.

Maeve and Dickie were missing.

"It's *her*," said Sarah. "I always knew . . ."

The house had been searched. Kate turned up Bitty, a maid who recalled noticing Dickie and his aunt, dressed as if to go out. That she had not actually seen them leave the house saved her position. Charles knew that even if Bitty had been there, she would not have been able to intervene. Maeve treated her family like servants; he could imagine how she treated servants.

"It's like before," said Philip Riddle, standing by his wife. "Only then it were Hill Wood. Now, it's a whole *city*."

Charles reproached himself for not considering Dickie. He had given a lot of thought to Davey and Princess Cuckoo, but rarely recalled this household harbored one proper child. When Charles

was in Eye, Dickie had not been born, was not part of the story.

Now, Charles saw where Dickie fit.

Davey had escaped *something*. Dickie would do as a replacement.

"Charles," said Kate, from the top of the stairs. "Would you come up?"

He left Sarah and Philip, and joined Kate. She led him into the studio.

Davey was still drawing.

Kate showed him finished pictures in which the children ventured deeper into the woods. A smug bunny in a beribboned pinafore appeared in a clearing. The girl, more Maeve than ever, loomed over the small, terrified rabbit. In one picture, her head was inflated twice the size of her body, hair puffed like a lion's mane. She showed angry, evil eyes and a toothy, dripping shark's maw. The rabbit fled, understandably. In the next picture, Maeve was herself again, though it would be hard to forget her scary head. She was snatching the boy, Dickie, away from a clutch of old womanish crows who sported veiled hats and reticules. Then the children came to a waterfall. Maeve used long-nailed fingers to unlock a door in the cascade—a door made of *flowing* water, not ice—to open a way into a wooded underworld.

"What does this mean, Davey?"

He drew faster than ever. Tears spotted his paper, blotching the pencil work. His face shut tight, he rocked back and forth, crooning.

"*My mother said . . . I never should . . . play with the gypsies . . . in the wood.*"

Another picture was finished and put aside.

The children were in a forested tunnel, passing a fallen tower. Goblins swarmed in the undergrowth, ears and tongues twitching, flat nostrils aquiver.

"I know that ruin," said Kate. "It's in the Gift. We were there when it collapsed."

“And *I* know the waterfall door.”

Kate began searching the studio.

“What are you looking for?” he asked her.

“A sketch pad. Something he can carry. We have to take him to the park. All this is happening *now*. The pictures are like *intelligence reports*.”

Kate opened a cupboard in the workbench and found a package of notebooks. She took several and shoved one open under Davey’s pencil, whispering to him, urging him to shift to a portable medium. After a beat of hesitation, he began again, drawing still faster, pencil scoring paper. Kate gathered the completed pictures into a sturdy artist’s folder.

“Stay with him a moment,” Charles told her, leaving the study.

Dickie’s parents were at the foot of the stairs, looking up.

“Is this household on the telephone?” Charles asked.

“Mr. Bulge insisted,” said Philip Riddle.

“The apparatus is in the downstairs parlor.”

“Ring up Scotland Yard and ask for Inspector Henry Mist. Tell him to meet us at the Gift.”

Riddle, a solid man, didn’t waste time asking for explanations. He went directly to the parlor.

Kate had Davey out of his studio and helped him downstairs. He still murmured and scribbled.

“Bad things in the woods,” Kate reported. “Very bad.”

Charles trusted her.

“Have you called a cab?” she asked.

“Quicker to walk.”

Sarah reached out as Kate and Charles helped Davey past, pleading wordlessly. Her lip was bleeding.

“There’s hope,” he told her.

She accepted that as the best offer available.

On the street, he and Kate must have seemed the abductors of a lunatic. When Davey finished a picture, Kate turned the page for him.

From a window peered the fat face of a sad little boy. He alone took notice of the peculiar trio. People on the street evaded them without comment. Charles did his best to look like someone who would brook no interference.

Every pause to allow a cart or carriage primacy was a heart blow.

The streets were uncommonly busy. People were mobile trees in these wilds, constantly shutting off and making new paths. London was more perilous than Hill Wood. Though it was a sunny afternoon and he walked on broad pavement, Charles recalled snow underfoot.

"What's in the pictures now?" he asked.

"Hard to make out. Children, goblins, woods. The boy seems all right still."

Maeve and Dickie must have taken this route, perhaps half an hour earlier. This storm had blown up in minutes.

If it weren't for Kate's leap of deduction, the absences might have gone unnoticed until teatime. Another reason to propose her for membership.

In the park, there was the expected chaos. Children, idlers, governesses, dogs. A one-man band played something from *The Mikado*.

"The crows," said Kate.

Charles saw what she meant. Some governesses gathered around a little girl, heads bobbing like birds, veiled hats like those in Davey's illustration.

"And that's the frightened bunny," he pointed out.

He remembered Maeve's temporary scary head. Davey's drawings weren't the literal truth, he hoped. They hinted at what really happened.

"Ladies," he began, "might I inquire whether you've seen two children, a girl of perhaps eleven and a slightly younger boy? You would take them for brother and sister."

The women reacted like Transylvanian peasants asked the most

convenient route to Castle Dracula, with hisses and flutterings and clucks very like curses.

"That horrid, *horrid* girl . . ." spat one.

Even in the circumstances, he had to swallow a smirk.

"That would be the miss. You have her exactly."

The governesses continued, yielding more editorial comment but no hard news.

"Why is that man dwawing?" asked the ribboned girl.

"He's an artist," Charles told her.

"My name is Becky d'Arbanvilliers," she said proudly. "When I gwow up and Papa cwoaks, I shall be *Lady* d'Arbanvilliers."

Few prospective heirs would be as honest, he supposed. At least, out loud. In cases of suspicious death, the police were wont to remember such offhand remarks.

"Did you meet a bad girl, Becky?"

She nodded her head, solemnly.

"And where is she now?"

Becky frowned, as angry as she was puzzled.

"I *told* Miss Wodgers, but she didn't believe me. The bad girl and the nasty boy went to the waterfall in that house."

She pointed to the Gift.

"There was a girl," said the governess, whose name he presumed was Miss Rodgers. "But not the one who so upset Becky. This was a nice, polite child."

Becky looked at Charles, frustrated by her governess's gullibility.

"It was her," she insisted, stamping a tiny foot.

Davey finished one notebook and started on the next. Kate took the filled book and leafed through, then found a picture.

"*This* girl?" she asked. "And this boy."

"That's them," said Becky. "What a pwetty picture. Will the man dwaw me? I'm pwettier than the bad girl."

"Miss Rodgers," he prompted.

The governess looked stricken.

"Yes," she admitted. "But she *smiled* so . . ."

Recriminations flew around the group of governesses.

"*Will the man dwaw me?*"

Kate leafed through the folder and found a picture of the children meeting the ribboned rabbit, the one in which Maeve was not showing her scary head. She handed it over. Becky was transported with delight, terrors forgotten.

Miss Rodgers saw the picture, puzzled and disturbed.

"How did he do this? It was drawn before he set eyes on Rebecca . . ."

They left the governesses wondering.

From the corner of his eye, Charles glimpsed a couple in black who weren't governesses. Mr. Hay and Mr. Effe. Since this morning, he had been aware of their floating presence. The Undertaking was playing its own game and had turned up here before he did. He would worry about that later, if he got the chance. Right now, he should be inside the Gift.

By the time they found the door concealed in the waterfall design, Inspector Mist was on the scene.

"Mr. Beauregard, what is all this about?"

7. "STAGE SNOW"

KATE KNEW CHARLES would make a token attempt to dissuade her from continuing. The argument, a variation on a theme with which she was bored, was conducted in shorthand.

Yes, it might be dangerous.

Yes, she was a woman.

No, that wouldn't make a difference.

Settled.

Mist of the Yard was distracted by Davey's compulsive sketching.

"Is this fellow some sort of psychic medium?"

“He has a connection with this business,” Charles told Mist. “This is Davey Harvill.”

“The boy from Eye.”

The Inspector evidently knew about the children of Eye. She was not surprised. Whisper had it that Mist was high up in the Bureau of Queer Complaints, an unpublicized Scotland Yard department constituted to deal with the “spook” cases.

Mist posted constables to keep back this afternoon’s crowds. Rumors circulated. The Gift was about to be opened to the public. Or razed to the ground. No one was sure. Helmeted bobbies assumed their usual attitudes, bored resignation to indicate nothing out of the ordinary taking place behind the barriers and truncheon-tapping warning that no monkey business would be tolerated. Popular phrases were recited: “Move along, now” and “There’s nothing to see ’ere.”

Two men in black clothes augmented by very black spectacles sauntered over. At the flash of a card, they were admitted to the inner circle.

They chimed with another whisper, about funereal officials seen pottering about new-made meteor craters or the sites of unnatural vanishments. Another high-stakes player at this table, in competition or alliance with the Diogenes Club and the BQC. The poor plodders of the Society for Psychical Research must feel left out, stuck with only the least mysterious of eternal mysteries, trivial table rappings and ghosts who did nothing but loom in sheets and say “boo!” to handy geese.

Charles made rapid introductions. “Mr. Hay and Mr. Effe, of the Undertaking. Mist you know. Katharine Reed . . .”

Mr. Effe bared poor teeth at her. Even without sight of his eyes, she could gauge his expression.

“Do we need the press, Beauregard?” he asked.

“*I* need *her*.”

Argument was squashed. She was proud of him, again. More than proud.

"The missing boy is in there," said Mist. "And his . . . sister?"

"*Aunt*," corrected Charles. "Maeve. Don't be taken in by her. She's not what she seems. The boy is Richard. Dickie. He's the one in danger. We must get him out of the Gift."

"The girl too," prompted Mr. Hay.

Charles shook his head. "She's long lost," he said. "It's the boy we want, we *need* . . ."

"That wasn't a suggestion," said the Undertaker.

Charles and Mist exchanged a look.

"Get that door kicked in," Mist told two hefty bobbies.

They shouldered the waterfall, shaking the whole of the Gift.

"It's probably unlocked and opens outward," Kate suggested.

The policemen stood back. The dented door swung slowly out, proving her point. Inside, it was darker than it should be. This was a bright afternoon. The ceiling of the Gift was mostly glass. It should be gloomy at worst.

White powder lay on the floor, footprints trodden in.

"Is that snow?" asked Mist.

"Stage snow," said Charles. "Remember, nothing in there is real. Which doesn't mean it's not dangerous."

"We'll need light. Willoughby, hand over your bull lantern."

One of the bobbies unlatched a device from his belt. Mist lit the lamp. Charles took it and shone a feeble beam into the dark. Stage snow fell from a sky ceiling. It was a clever trick—reflective sparkles set into wooden walls. But she did not imagine the cold wind that blew from the Gift, chilling through her light blouse. She was not dressed to pay a call on the Snow Queen.

Charles ventured into the dark.

Kate helped Davey follow. He had stopped chanting out loud, but his neck muscles worked as he subaudibly repeated his rhyme.

In his pictures, goblins gathered.

Mist came last, with another lamp.

Mr. Hay and Mr. Effe remained outside, in the summer sunshine.

This was not a part of Færie Kate had seen yesterday, but Charles evidently knew his way. The walls were theatrical flats painted with convincing woodlands. Though the corridor was barely wide enough for two people side by side, scenery seemed to extend for miles. In the minimal light, the illusion was perfect. She reached out. Where she was sure snow fell through empty air, her fingers dimpled oiled canvas.

They could not be more than fifty feet inside the Gift, which she knew to cover a circle barely a hundred yards across, but it seemed miles from Regent's Park. Glancing back, she saw the Undertakers, scarecrows against an oblong of daylight. Looking forward, there was night and forest. Stars sparkled on the roof.

The passage curved, and she couldn't see the entrance anymore.

Of course, the Gift was a fairground maze.

Charles, tracking clear footprints, came to a triplicate fork in the path. Three sets of prints wound into each tunnel.

"Bugger," said Mist, adding, "pardon me, miss."

She asked for light and sorted back through Davey's pictures. She was sure she had seen this. She missed it once and had to start again. Then she hit on sketches representing this juncture. On paper, Maeve led Dickie down the left-hand path. In the next picture, goblins tottered out of the trees on stilts tipped with child-sized shoes that (horribly) had disembodied feet stuffed into them. The imps made false trails down the other paths, smirking with mean delight, cackles crawling off the paper.

Kate was beginning to *hate* Davey's goblins.

Charles bent low to enter the left-hand tunnel, which went under two oaks whose upper branches tangled, as if the trees were frozen in a slapping argument. Disapproving faces twisted in the bark.

Even Kate couldn't stand up in this tunnel.

They made slow, clumsy progress. It was hard to light the way ahead. All Charles and Mist could do was cast moon circles on the

nearest surface, infernally reflecting their own faces.

The tunnel angled downward.

She wondered if this led to the dynamo room. The interior of the Gift was on several levels. Yesterday, it had been hot here. Now snowflakes whispered on her face like ice pricks.

"That's not likely," said Mist, looking at snowmelt in his palm.

Davey stumbled over an exposed root. Kate reached out to catch him. They fell against a barbed bramble and staggered off the path, tumbling into a chilly drift. Painted walls had given way to three-dimensional scenery, the break unnoticed. The snow must be artificially generated—ice chips sifted from a hidden device up above—but felt unpleasantly real.

Mist and Charles played their lamps around.

Kate assumed they were in the large central area she had visited, but in this minimal light it seemed differently shaped. Everything was larger. She was now in proportion with trees that had been miniature.

A vicious wind blew from somewhere, spattering her spectacles with snow dots. The waterfall was frozen in serried waves, trapping bugeyed, dunce-capped Silly Fish in a glacier grip.

Charles took off his ulster and gave it to her. She gratefully accepted.

"I never thought I'd miss my Sir Boris costume," he said.

Mist directed his lamp straight up. Its throw didn't reach any ceiling. He pointed it down, and found grass, earth, and snow—no floorboards, no paving, no matting. In the wind, trees shifted and creaked.

"Bloody good trick," said the policeman.

Davey hunched in a huddle, making tinier and tinier pictures.

There was movement in the dark. Charles turned, pointing his light at rustles. Wherever the lantern shone, all was stark and still. Outside the beam, things were evilly active. The originals of Davey's goblins, whatever they might be, were in the trees. The illustrations, satirical cartoons, were tinged with grotesque humor.

She feared there would be nothing funny about the live models.

"*Dickie!*" shouted Charles.

His echo came back, many times. Charles's breath plumed. His shout dissipated in the open night. She could have sworn mocking, imitative voices replaced the echo.

"There's a castle," said Kate, looking at Davey's latest drawings. "No, a *palace*. Maeve is leading Dickie up steps, to meet . . . I don't know, a prince?"

Davey was still working. His arm was in the way of a completed picture. Gently, she shifted his wrist.

In a palatial hall, Dickie was presented to a mirror, looking at himself. Only, his reflection was different. The boy in the glass had thinner eyes, more pointed ears, a nastier mouth.

Davey went on to another book.

Kate showed Charles and Mist the new sequence.

"We have to find this place, quickly," said Charles. "The boy is in immediate danger."

8. "THE GAME IS UP"

MAEVE HAD TURNED her ankle. Dickie's aunt did not usually act so like a girl. After helping as best he could, he left her wrapped up by the path. She kept their candle. When the mystery was solved, he could find his way back to her light. Bravely, Maeve urged him on, to follow the clues.

In the middle of the Gift, she said, was a palace.

Inside the palace was the *culprit*.

Steeled, Dickie made his way from clue to clue.

Moonbeam pools picked them out. A dagger with the very tip sheared away, a half-burned page of cipher, a cigarette end with three distinctive bands, a cameo brooch that opened to a picture of a hairy-faced little girl, an empty blue glass bottle marked with skull and crossbones, a bloodied grape stem, a dish of butter with

a sprig of parsley sunk into it, a dead canary bleached white, a worm unknown to science, a squat jade idol with its eye gems prized out, a necklace crushed to show its gems were paste, a false beard with a cardboard nose attached.

Excellent clues, leading to his destination.

When he first glimpsed the palace through the trees, Dickie thought it a doll's house, much too small for him. When, at last, he found the front door, spires rose above him. It was clever, like one of Maeve's conjuring tricks.

Who *was* the culprit?

Mr. Satterthwaite Bulge (he had known the dead man best, and could have been blackmailed or have something to gain from a will) . . . Uncle Davey (surely not, though some said he was "touched"; he might have another person living in his head, not a nice one) . . . the clever gent and the Irish lady who had called this afternoon (Dickie had liked them straight off, which should not blind him to sorry possibilities) . . . Greedy Sid Silcock (too obvious and convenient, though he could well be in it as a minion of the true mastermind) . . . Miss MacAndrew (another vengeance plotter?) . . . Bitty, the rosy-cheeked maid (hmmmn, something was *stirring* about her complexion) . . . Ma and Da (*no!*) . . .

He would find out.

The palace disappointed. It was a wooden facade, propped up by rough timbers. There were no rooms, just hollow space. The exterior was painted to look like stone. Inside was bare board, nailed without much care.

He could not see much. Even through his magnifying glass.

"Hello," he called.

"'Lo?" came back at him, in his own voice.

Or something very like.

"You are found out."

"Out!"

The culprit was here.

But Dickie was still in the dark. He must remember to include a

box of lucifers in his detective apparatus, with long tapers. Perhaps even a small lantern. Having left his candle with Maeve, so she wouldn't be lonely, he was at a disadvantage.

"The game is up," he announced, sounding braver than he felt.

"Up?"

"This palace is surrounded by *special detectives*. You are under arrest."

"Arrest?"

The culprit was an *echo*.

The dark in front of his face gathered, solidified into coherence. He made out a human shape.

Dickie's hand fell upon the culprit's shoulder.

"Ah hah!"

A hand gripped his own shoulder.

"Hah," came back, a gust of hot breath into his face.

He squeezed and was squeezed.

His shoulder hurt, his knees weakened. He was pushed down, as if shrinking.

The hand on his shoulder grew, fingers like hard twigs poking into him. His feet sank into earth, which swarmed around his ankles. His socks would get muddied, which would displease Ma.

Shapes moved all around.

The culprit was not alone. He had minions.

He imagined them—Greedy Sid, Miss MacAndrew, Uncle Satt, an ape, a mathematics tutor, a defrocked curate. The low folk who were part of the mystery.

"Who are you?"

"You!"

9. "TWO JUMPS BEHIND"

THERE WAS LIGHT ahead. A candle flame.

Charles pointed it out.

The light moved, behind a tree, into hiding.

Charles played his lantern over the area, wobbling the beam to indicate where the others should look, then directing it elsewhere, hoping to fool the candle-holder into believing she was overlooked.

Charles was sure it was a *she*.

He handed his lantern to Kate, who took it smoothly and continued the "search."

Charles stepped off the track.

Whatever was passing itself off as snow was doing a good job. His shins were frozen as he waded. He crouched low and his bare hands sunk into the stuff.

He crept toward the tree where the light had been.

"Pretty princess," he breathed to himself, "sit tight . . ."

He had picked up night skills in warmer climes, crawling over rocky hills with his face stained, dressed like an untouchable. He could cross open country under a full moon without being seen. In this dark, with so many things to hide behind, it should be easy.

But it wasn't. The going was treacherous. The snow lay lightly over brambles that could snare like barbed wire.

Within a couple of yards of the tree, he saw the guarded, flickering spill of light. He flexed his fingers into the snow, numbing his joints. Sometimes, he had pains in his knuckles—which he had never mentioned to anyone. He stood, slowly.

He held his breath.

In a single, smooth movement, he stepped around the tree and laid a hand on . . .

. . . *bark*!

He summoned the others.

The candle perched in a nook, wax dribbling.

Clear little footprints radiated from a hollow in the roots. They spiraled and multiplied, haring off in all directions as if a dozen princesses had sprung into being and bolted.

Kate showed Charles a new-drawn picture of Maeve skipping

away, tittering to herself.

"Have you noticed he never draws us?" he said.

"Maybe we're not in the story yet."

"We're here all right," said Mist. "Two jumps behind."

Mist supported Davey now. The lad was running out of paper. His pictures were smaller, crowded together—two or three to a page—and harder to make out.

"Let me try something," said Kate.

She laid her fingers on Davey's hand, halting his pencil. He shook, the beginnings of a fit. She took his chin and forced him to look at her.

"Davey, where's the palace?"

He was close to tears, frustrated at not being able to draw, to channel what he knew.

"Not in pictures," she said. "Words. Tell me in words."

Davey shook his head and shut his eyes. Squeaks came from the back of his throat.

". . . mother said . . . never should . . ."

"Dickie's in the woods," said Kate.

"With the gypsies?"

"Yes, the naughty, naughty gypsies. That bad girl is taking Dickie to them. We can help him, but you have to help us. Please, Davey. For Dickie. These are *your* woods. You mapped them and made them. Where in the woods . . ."

Davey opened his eyes.

He turned, breaking Kate's hold, and waded off, snow slushing around his feet. He pressed point to paper and made three strokes, then snapped the pencil and dropped the notebook.

"This way," he said.

Davey walked with some confidence toward a stand of trees. He reached up and touched a low-hanging branch, pushing a bird's nest, sending a ripple through branch, tree, and sky. He took out his penknife, opened the blade, and stuck it into the backdrop. With a tearing sound, the knife parted canvas and sank to the hilt.

Davey drew his knife in a straight line, across the branch and into the air. He made a corner and cut downward, as if hacking a door into a tent. The fabric ripped, noisily.

Charles thought he could see for hundreds of yards, through the woods. Even as Davey cut his door, Charles could swear the lad stood in a real landscape.

Davey slashed the canvas, methodically.

There was a doorway in the wood.

Beyond was gloom but not dark. It looked like the quarter where backstage people worked, where Sir Boris had gotten dressed and prepared or took his infrequent meal and rest breaks.

"Through here," said Dickie.

They followed. Beyond the door, it wasn't cold anymore. It was close, stifling.

Dickie cut a door in an opposite wall.

"I know where you're hiding," he said, to someone beyond.

A screech filled the passage. A small person with wild hair tore between their legs, launching a punch at Davey's chest, clawing at Kate's face, sinking a shoulder into Mist's stomach.

Charles blocked her.

The screech died. The girl's face was in shadow, but could no longer be mistaken. This was not—*had never been*—Maeve Harvill. This was Princess Cuckoo, of Pixieland. Rather, of the shadow realm Davey recreated in his pictures, which Satterthwaite Bulge had named Færie and built in the real world. That was what she had wanted all along.

"Where is he?" Charles asked. "Dickie?"

The little face shut tight, lip buttoned, chin and cheeks set. This close, she seemed a genuine child. No Thuggee strangler or Scots preacher could be as iron-willed as a little girl determined not to own up.

"I know," said Davey. "It's where she took me, where I got away from."

The girl shook her head, humming furiously.

“That’s an endorsement,” Charles commented. “Lead on, Davey.”

10. “HOLES”

THEY DESCENDED INTO the ground. Brickwork tunnel walls gave way to shored earth and flagstones. Kate could not believe Regent’s Park was only a few feet above their heads.

She squirreled through, following Davey. Charles dragged Maeve after him. Inspector Mist held the rear.

The place smelled of muck.

They emerged in the dynamo chamber, site of the sacrifice that had kept the throngs away from the Gift so Maeve could make her private exchange. Roots thick as a man’s torso burst through, spilling bricks on the floor, entwining like angry prehistoric snakes. A canvas cover over the dynamos, stained with red mud, was partially lifted. Ivy grew like a plague, twining into ironwork, twisting around stilled pistons and bent valves. The weed grip had cracked one of the great wheels.

Green sparks nestled in nooks. Fairy lights, little burning pools that needed no dynamos.

Dickie sat in front of the machine, knees together, cap straight.

“There he is,” said Maeve. “No harm done. Satisfied?”

Charles shone his lantern. Emerald light points danced in the boy’s eyes. He raised a hand to shield his face.

“Princess,” said the boy. “Is that you?”

They were here in time! Kate wanted to hug the errant special detective.

“Dickie,” said Charles, offhandedly. “Tell me, what clue enabled you to solve the Baffling Business of the Cheating Governess?”

Dickie lowered his hand. His eyes were hard.

Ice brushed the untidy hair at the nape of Kate’s neck.

“Who was the Bun Bandit?” she asked.

No answer. The light points in his eyes were fixed. Seven in each. In the shape of the constellation Ursa Major.

“That’s not D-Dickie,” said Davey. “That’s . . .”

“I think we know who that is,” said Charles.

Kate’s insides plunged. She looked at the boy. He was like Maeve, but new made. Clean and fresh and tidy, still slightly moist. He did not yet have the knack of passing among people.

Davey whirled about the chamber, tapping roots, tearing off covers.

Maeve and the boy exchanged gazes and kept quiet.

Kate knew Sarah Riddle would not be happy with a boy who merely *looked* like her son.

“So, it’s another one,” said Inspector Mist, walking around the boy.

He looked up at the policeman, unblinking, head rotating like an owl’s.

“That’s a good trick,” Kate said.

The boy experimented with a smile of acknowledgment. It did not come off well.

Charles was with Davey, talking to him quietly, insistently. “Think hard, Davey . . . this is that place, the place that was under Hill Wood . . .”

“Yes, I know. But this is London.”

“The place where you were taken is *somewhere else*, Davey. Somewhere that travels. Somewhere with holes that match up to holes here. I don’t know how the hole was made in Eye. Perhaps it was always there. But the hole here, in the Gift, you made.”

Davey nodded, to himself.

“I thought I’d gotten away, but I brought it with me, in my head. The drawing, the dreams. That was it, pressing on me. I cheated *them*, by their lights. I owed them.”

He felt his way around now, carefully. He began humming his rhyme—his long-lost sister’s rhyme—then caught himself, and was

quiet, chewing his lip like a Harvill.

"A hole," he said, at last. "There's a hole. Something like a hole."

Davey took out his penknife. He shook his head and threw it away.

"Would this be any use?" suggested Inspector Mist.

The policeman pulled a giant-sized spanner from the clutches of greenery and handed it over.

Davey took the length of iron, felt its heft, and nodded.

Charles stood back. Davey took a swing, as if with an axe. The spanner clanged against exposed root. The whole chamber rung with the blow. Kate's teeth rattled. Old bark sloughed, exposing bone-yellow wood flesh. Davey struck again, and the wood parted.

There was an exhalation of foul air, and a vast inpouring of soft, insect-inhabited earth. Almost liquid, it slurried around their ankles, then grew to a tidal wave that threatened to fill the chamber. Some of the lights winked out. She found herself clinging to Charles, who held on to a dangling chain to steady his footing. Mist hopped nimbly out of the way.

The sham children paid no mind.

In the dirt, something moved. Charles deftly shifted Kate's grip to the chain and weighed in, with Davey, shoveling earth with cupped hands.

A very dirty little boy was disclosed, spitting leaves.

Charles whispered in his ear.

"Jack of hearts, with one corner bent off!" Dickie shouted.

Davey hugged his nephew, who was a bit embarrassed.

The dirty boy looked at his clean mirror image. Dickie had a spasm of fear, but got over it.

"You'd better leave," Charles told the impostor.

The failed changeling stood, lifted his shoulders at the girl in a well-I-*tried* shrug, and stepped close to the fissure in the wall. The gap seemed too narrow. As the *faux* Dickie neared the hole, he seemed to fold thinner, and be sucked beyond, into deeper,

frothing darkness. The stench settled, but remained fungoid and corpse-filthy.

Everyone looked at Maeve.

"So, Princess Cuckoo," said Charles, hands on hips, "what's to be done with you?"

She regarded him, blankly.

11. "YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW WHAT YOU GET BACK"

THE PLACE WAS changing. The roots withdrew. The crack in the wall narrowed, as if healing. A machine-oil tang cut through the peaty smell.

"The holes are closing," said Davey.

Charles considered the Princess. It had been important that there be *two* cuckoos, Prince and Princess. Davey's escape from the realm beyond the holes had stalled some design. If Dickie had been successfully supplanted, it would have started again, rumbling inexorably toward its end. Charles did not even want to guess what had just been thwarted. Plans laid in a contingent world were now abandoned—which should be enough for the Ruling Cabal.

That unknown place rubbed against thinning, permeable walls. Davey's drawings were not the first signs that barriers could be breached. Everywhere, he once said, has its stories. Many places also had their holes, natural or special-made. It was difficult, but travelers could pass through veils that separated there from here and here from there.

This girl-shaped person was one such.

"Princess, if I may call you that . . ."

She nodded. Her face was thinner now, cheekbones more apparent, pupils oval, skin a touch green in the lamplight.

". . . outside the Gift are two men dressed in black."

She knew the Undertaking.

“They would like me to hand you over to them. You are a *specimen* of great interest. As you once had *plans* for us, they have plans for you. Which you might not care for.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said.

“You say that now. You’re disappointed, of course. Your life for the past eight years—and I can imagine it has been utterly strange—was geared up to this moment. And it’s proven a bust.”

“No need to rub it in, Mr. Detective.”

“I am just trying to make you realize this might not be the *worst* moment of your sojourn here.”

The girl spat out a bitter little laugh.

She *was* like a child. Perhaps they all were. That childishness was evident in all the impressions that came through the holes, dressed up and painted in and cut about by Davey Harvill and Uncle Satt and Arthur Machen and George MacDonald and Arthur Rackham and many, many others. They were the *little* people, small in their wonderments, prone to spasms of sunlit joy and long rainy afternoon sulks.

“Mr. Hay and Mr. Effe might tire of asking questions. It can be boring, not getting answers. In the end, the Undertaking might just *cut you up* in the name of science. To find wings folded inside your shoulder bones, then spread them on a board and pin you like a butterfly. There’s a secret museum for creatures like you. It’s possible you’d be under glass for a long time.”

A thrill passed through her. A horror.

That was something to be proud of. He had terrified the Medusa.

“What do you want?” she said, quietly.

“His sister,” he said, nodding at Davey.

She thought it over.

“There’s a balance. She can’t be here if I am. Not for long. You saw, with Dickie. Things bend.”

“You’re not going to *let her go*?” said Kate.

Charles sympathized with Kate’s outrage. Mist, as well. This

girl was responsible for at least one murder. Sackham, obviously—to keep the Gift shut, so her business could proceed. Almost certainly, she had contrived the death of Violet Harvill, who could not be fooled forever. (Did Davey know that? How could he not?) Charles was certain the Princess would answer for her failure to the powers she served or represented.

"It is for the best," he told Kate.

Mist gave him the nod. Good man.

"I should warn you," said the Princess, "you might not know what you get back. Time passes differently."

He understood. If thirty years fly past in three days, what might not transpire in eight years?

The Princess stood by the fissure, which pulsed—almost like a mouth.

She looked at them all.

"Goodbye, Hawkshaw," she said. "The Dickie who was almost is less fun."

Dickie frowned. Kate had most of the dirt off his face.

"Auntie," he said. "I know you didn't mean it."

The Princess seemed sad but said nothing. Suddenly boneless and flimsy, she slid into the slit as if it were a postbox and she a letter. Long seconds passed. The fissure bulged and creaked. An arm flopped out.

Davey took hold of the hand and pulled.

Charles grabbed Davey's waist and hauled. Mist and Kate lent their strength. Even so, it was hard going. Davey's grip slipped on oily skin. Charles's forearm ached, as he felt the old bite.

A shoulder and head, coated with mud, emerged. Eyes opened in the mask of filth. Bright, alive eyes.

Then, in a long tangle, a whole body slithered out. She drew breath, as if just born, and gave vent to a cry. Noise filled the dynamo chamber.

"Let's take the quickest way out," Charles said.

Kate went ahead with the lanterns. The three men carried the

limp, adult length of the rescued girl between them. Dickie, magnifying glass held up, followed.

When they banged out of the waterfall door, Mist ordered a constable to fetch water from the horse trough in Regent's Crescent. The newfound girl lay on the ground, her head in Davey's lap. A drapery wound around her, plastered to her body like a toga, but her bare, gnarled feet stuck out.

Kate held Dickie back.

Mr. Hay and Mr. Effe exchanged dark glances, unreadable. When Charles looked again, they were gone. A worry for another day.

Philip and Sarah Riddle got past the cordon and bustled around, too relieved at the return of Dickie to ask after the new arrival. They took their son, scolding and embracing him.

Mist had his men rounded up buckets of water, and had to stop P. C. Willoughby from dashing one in the woman's face.

"Looks like she's been buried alive, sir," said the constable.

"It's not so bad," said Dickie, bravely.

Charles requisitioned a flannel from a stray governess, soaked it, and cleaned the face of the woman who had come back.

A beautiful blank appeared with the first wash. She was exactly like the Princess. Then a few lines became apparent, and a white streak in her hair.

"Maeve," said Davey.

The woman looked up, recognizing her brother.

Charles would have taken her for a well-preserved forty or a hard-lived thirty. He stood back, and looked at the family reunion.

"How long's it been?" she said.

"Not but a moment," said Davey.

She closed her eyes and smiled, safe.

Charles found Kate was holding his elbow, face against his sleeve. He suspected a maneuver to conceal tears. A pricking in his eyes suggested discreet dabbing might be in order to repair his own composure.

A crowd began to assemble. There was still interest in the Gift. It occurred to Charles that it might even be safe to open the place, though Mist would have to write up the Sackham case carefully for the BQC files.

Maeve rolled in Davey's grasp and flung her arms around his neck.

Sarah Riddle noticed her sister, recognized her at once. She gasped, in wonder. Her husband, puzzled at first, caught on and began to dance a jig.

Charles slipped his own arm around Kate's waist. Her hands were hooked into his coat. They had been through a great deal together. Again. Pamela had been right about Katharine Reed; she was an extraordinarily promising girl. No, that was then. Now, she was an extraordinarily delivering woman.

He lifted her face from his arm and set her spectacles straight.

"What should a fairy tale have?" he asked.

Kate sniffed. "A happy ending," she ventured.

He kissed her nose, which set her crying again.

She arched up on tiptoes and kissed him on the lips, which should not have been the surprise it was.

Mist gave a nod to Willoughby.

The constable raised big hands to his belt, thumb tapping the handle of his truncheon.

"Move along, now," he told the gathering crowds. "There's nothing to see 'ere."

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